



Biggles

TAKES IT ROUGH



**CAPTAIN
W.E. JOHNS**

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MAP

Island of TOLA



CHAPTER 1

A VISITOR SEEKS ADVICE

THE only sound in Air Police Headquarters at Scotland Yard was the dry rustle of paper as everyone busied himself with one of the several routine office jobs necessary to keep the records up to date; international press cuttings to be filed, amendments to Air Traffic Regulations, modifications to existing types of aircraft, details of new prototypes under test, and the like.

Into this the sharp buzz of the intercom telephone cut sharply.

Biggles picked up the instrument on his desk. 'Bigglesworth here.' He listened for a moment, then added: 'Right away, sir.' He replaced the receiver and rose to his feet.

'The Chief?' queried Bertie, without pausing in what he was doing.

'Right in one.'

'What's cooking?'

'He didn't waste time telling me on the phone, but judging from his tone of voice it won't be bacon and eggs. He said he wasn't to be disturbed, so he won't be pleased if someone has barged in on him. See you presently.'

Biggles walked down the corridor to the private office of Air Commodore Raymond, Assistant Commissioner, knocked and entered. A glance confirmed his conjecture.

There was another person present, seated near the Air Commodore's desk. He was a good-looking young man, lean, with a shrewd eye; age, somewhere in the early twenties. Judging from a well-cut tweed suit and immaculate linen, he was obviously a man of substance.

The Air Commodore introduced him briefly. 'Oh, Bigglesworth, this is Mr Roderic Macaster, from Canada. Mr Macaster, meet Air Detective-Inspector Bigglesworth, my senior operational pilot. Get yourself a chair, Bigglesworth.'

'Glad to know you, Inspector,' said Macaster, as they shook hands. He spoke with a soft transatlantic accent.

Biggles pulled up a chair and sat down.

The Air Commodore pushed forward his cigarette box and looking at Biggles continued. 'I gather from what little he has so far told me that Mr Macaster is having a spot of trouble over here and has been advised to tell us about it. It seems that aircraft, or an aircraft, may come into the picture, so I thought it would be a good thing if you heard the story first hand instead of me having to repeat it. You may want to ask some questions.'

Biggles turned to the stranger. 'Go ahead, Mr Macaster. I'm listening.'

'I guess it's a longish story, but I'll keep it as short as possible.'

'Just stick to the facts.'

'Thanks. As the Chief just told you, my name is Roderic Macaster. I carry

a Canadian passport, but I've spent a lot of my time in the States. Around fifty years ago my grandfather, John Macaster, went west from Ross-shire, where he had lived for some time, although the Macasters were originally of Tola, one of the lesser Western Isles.

'Well, he made a fortune, but coming from what we might call ordinary simple working stock, he had no real use for the money. Or maybe he'd left his heart in the Highlands. He still had the Scottish newspapers sent over, and one day an item in the *Northern Scot* gave him an idea. If you like, an inspiration. It was to the effect that things had got so bad on Tola that the Government had decided to evacuate to the mainland what was left of the dwindling population. Perhaps they weren't as tough as they used to be years gone by, but without a doctor, dentist, or any sort of medical facilities, not even a school for the kids, it was no sort of a life.'

'This evacuation has, I believe, happened to more than one of the Western Isles,' put in Biggles.

'Sure it has. It comes when the people can no longer make a go of it. It happened to Tola before my time, so what I'm telling you I got from my father. Well, old John Macaster got the bright idea of buying the island and retiring there for the rest of his days. There's an old castle there, once the seat of the Master of Tola — who, incidentally, was a Macaster. He resolved to put it in good shape, build new houses for the people, bring in stock and modern farm equipment, and generally make the island a place fit to live on.'

'Was this a practical proposition?'

'I don't see why not.'

'But the people had gone.'

'Sure they'd gone, but the old man reckoned they'd come back if it was made worth their while. Money was no object, and as the old man had made his pile farming grain and livestock, he must have known what he was taking on. For a start he intended to import a contractor with a thousand or so labourers to clean up the place, providing hutments for their temporary accommodation. Oh, yes, he thought big. Well, he set things going and took the island from the Crown on a hundred years' lease. I reckon they were glad to let him have it. It was no use to anybody as it was. That's where it ended. Before he could cross the Atlantic to inspect his new property he had a heart attack and died. So it all came to nothing.'

'You mean nothing more was done about it?'

'Not a thing. The old man had one son — my father. He'd been brought up in the lap of luxury, and moving in a different circle he wasn't interested in anything involving physical labour. I don't think he ever gave Tola a second thought. He could make money more easily on the stock market. He had inherited the old man's fortune and the idea of living rough on a remote island wasn't his idea of paradise. Twelve months ago he died and everything came to me. I knew all about this scheme for putting Tola back on the map, and it had always seemed to me a pity that the old man's great ambition had been

allowed to go by the board.’ Macaster smiled. ‘Maybe I’m a throw-back to the original hard-working Highlanders who had to fight the land or sea for a living — and fight anyone who tried to stop ‘em. I now held the lease, and as it contained an option of renewal I gave the matter some serious thought. I had nothing to do. No need to do anything. To put the island into shape seemed as good a way of doing something useful as anything else I could think of. I decided the first thing was to have a look at the place.’

‘Have you been there?’

‘I sure have.’

‘And what did you find?’

‘Nothing. That is, nothing I didn’t expect to see. That brings me to the point.’

‘Just a minute,’ requested Biggles. ‘Let me get the geography right. Where exactly is this lonely lump of land?’

‘Roughly thirty miles from the Butt of Lewis — that’s the northern tip — and forty miles from the mainland.’

‘How big is it?’

‘About four miles long and a mile wide at the widest part. It isn’t utterly isolated. From the castle hill it’s possible to see one or two smaller islands on the horizon.’

‘All uninhabited?’

‘As far as I know. Being where they are it’s unlikely they ever were inhabited.’

‘What’s the terrain of Tola like?’

‘Just as you’d expect. Pretty rough. Any ground once cultivated has gone back to heather, weeds and rushes. I can tell you more about that if you’re interested. The climate isn’t bad. Windy, of course. But being where it is it must be on the fringe of the Gulf Stream, so it escapes anything like hard frost. Oh, yes, there are possibilities.’

‘I see. Go on.’

‘By the time I got over here I had worked myself into a state of mild enthusiasm. This, I thought, is going to be fun. But it didn’t work out like that. In fact, I was due for some shocks. The first trouble I struck was how to get to the place. I went up and down the coast looking for someone willing to take me to Tola. There were plenty of boats, but not a soul was ready to talk once I’d mentioned my island. They behaved as if I was poison — me, a Macaster! I’ve never seen such a dour lot in my life. They wouldn’t even listen to me.’

‘Couldn’t you find out what was wrong?’

‘I might as well have talked to a brick wall.’

Biggles smiled faintly as he stubbed his cigarette. ‘It would be easier to open an oyster with a match stick than get a Highlander to talk if he has some reason for keeping his mouth shut.’

‘Are you telling me! But don’t forget I’m a Scot. I’ll admit there was a moment when I nearly gave up and went home in disgust. What sort of

gratitude was this? After all, my intention had been to do these people some good. I thought they'd be delighted to hear about it. Then, as I thought over it, something inside me began to boil. Who were these people to keep me off my property? Who did they think they were that they could brush me off like a wasp off a pot of jam? All right, I thought, if that's how you want it. We'll see what you have to say when you see me importing some of these miserable displaced persons from refugee camps in Europe. They'll be glad enough to come when they learn I have homes waiting for them. If it costs me every dollar I've got I'm going to make Tola a better place to live than ever it was.'

A slow grin spread over Biggles's face. 'That's the spirit.' He became serious. 'But be careful you don't start a private war. What did you do next?'

'I came south, bought a small cabin cruiser and had it delivered to me at Lochinver. Nothing was going to stop me getting to Tola.'

'That must have cost you a pretty penny.'

'By this time I didn't care what I spent. I'd show these churlish Scots they couldn't push me around.'

'Those seas can be nasty.'

'So what? I've sailed a boat before. I was going to Tola and no one was going to stop me. Hang it all, I own the place.'

'So you went.'

'I sure did. I thought as it might be my first and last visit I'd make a job of it and stay a day or two. So I put aboard a stock of food and away I went. I didn't tell anyone where I was going and nobody saw me leave.'

Biggles shook his head sadly. 'Don't fool yourself, Mr Macaster. If I know the Highlander a good many eyes were watching you.'

'It was pitch dark when I left.'

'That would make no difference. I've sometimes thought the Highlanders must be gifted with second sight. I'd wager everyone for miles knew exactly what you were up to. But never mind that. What did you find on Tola and where do the Air Police come into this interesting operation?'

'I shall come to that presently,' was the rejoinder. 'If I sound long-winded it's because I'm trying to give you a clear picture of events as they happened. I had realized of course that for some reason I wasn't wanted on Tola, and that made me all the more curious to find out why. I met only one man who would talk and he was a Macaster. He came to me in a manner I can only describe as secretive, if not furtive, and advised me to forget about the island. He seemed to be hinting at something sinister, something unnatural. Could you believe that?'

Biggles nodded. 'In the matter of physical courage the Highlander is second to none in the world, which is why they make the finest shock troops anywhere. There's only one thing scares him, and that's anything tied up with the supernatural. When telling a spooky story his favourite opening gambit is: "Mind you, I'm not superstitious," whereas in fact he's saturated with local legends about hauntings, kelpies and what have you. Over ages of time that

has become as deep rooted in his system as is the heather on his native hills.'

'When I pressed him to be more specific all he would say was, Tola was a bad place for adders, which bit grazing cattle on the nose and sometimes killed them.'

'Sheer balderdash! There are adders on many moors in Scotland. I'm told they're common on the Island of Mull, but that doesn't prevent people from living there. They don't even talk about adders. Once in a while someone gets bitten. So what? If people left the Highlands on account of adders the country would have been depopulated long ago. Forget it. So you went to Tola. What did you find there?'

'Everything much as I expected.'

'Any adders?'

'I didn't see one.'

'Carry on.'

'It all looked mighty depressing. The island, shaped roughly like a crescent moon, lies across the weather that rolls in from the Atlantic. The windward side is sheer precipice. It falls gently to the leeward, where in one place there's a small open bay with a bit of a beach, mostly shingle but with a certain amount of sand. The rocks begin at each end. Fortunately, at the northern end of the beach there's a snug little cove in the rocks, part natural and part artificial, where in the old days I suppose the people kept their boats, for fishing and getting to the mainland. You might call it a harbour. I tied up there while I explored the place from end to end. It took me three days.'

'Did you have a look at the castle?'

'Of course. I found it in better condition than I expected after being empty for so long. It's built of local stone and was put there to stay; not only stay but stand a siege if necessary. I found it a lot bigger than I expected. Anyhow, it's still weather-proof. There are about twenty houses still standing, the usual dry stone walling and thatch. Some are huddled together making what must have been a village. The rest are crofts and small holdings scattered about haphazard. Rusty wire and broken stone walls still mark the boundaries of the land once under cultivation. Nothing much else. One could understand why the place was abandoned. It may have been all right years ago, when people didn't expect as much from life as they do now. They wouldn't stand for it today. Imagine it. No communication with anywhere except by boat and then always at the mercy of the weather. In winter the island might be cut off for weeks at a time.'

'How about water?'

'Oh there's plenty of water. Enough to give me fresh ideas. There's a small loch roughly in the middle fed by a number of springs and brooks. It has an outlet to the sea, a dandy little river about a mile and a half long; not very big, but large enough to carry a nice run of sea-trout and possibly a few salmon. When I was there the top end of the loch, shallow water over gravel, was stiff with spawning sea-trout. Some had even run into the brooks.'

‘What ideas did this give you?’

‘That water is never fished. Why not? Sea-trout are worth nearly as much on the market as salmon. But I wasn’t thinking of that. I saw a few deer on the high ground; with grouse, woodcock and snipe lower down, duck on the loch, and the fishing, I began to picture a nice little sporting estate with the castle as an hotel. That would mean servants, ghillies and so on, which might bring the people back. I found lobsters among the rocks, too.’

‘What would you do with them?’

‘Can them. Start a little canning industry. Anything to provide employment.’

Biggles smiled. ‘It’s an idea. Carry on.’

‘That’s about all. The only other building was the lighthouse.’

Biggles’s eyebrows went up. ‘So there’s a lighthouse!’

‘There was, but like the rest it isn’t used any more. Apparently some time ago it was decided to build a new one, but instead of putting it on the old site it was built on one of the smaller outer islands. From Tola in clear weather you can see the light flashing.’

Biggles reached for another cigarette. ‘This is all very interesting, Mr Macaster, but I’m still waiting to hear what it has to do with us.’

‘Now I’ve given you a rough picture of the general set-up I can tell you,’ announced Macaster. ‘I have a feeling there’s something going on, on my little island. If you like you can put it down to the second sight you spoke about just now. To start with, when I went into the castle, the first thing that struck me was the place had recently been lived in.’

‘Was there any concrete evidence of that?’

‘No, except — how can I put it? There was a certain smell you don’t get in a place that’s been empty for a hundred years or more. A warmish sort of smell, as if there had been a fire lighted... and cooking. Outside the back premises I found a heap of peats. I’ll admit I don’t know much about peat as fuel, but these didn’t look as though they’d been lying there for any length of time. Had they been they’d have been crumbled by the weather. There was also some driftwood which, as there are no trees on the island except a few stunted birches, could have been collected for kindling.’

Biggles looked puzzled. ‘How did you get into the castle?’

‘I just walked in.’

‘Did you have a key?’

‘No. If there is one I’ve never seen it.’

‘So you found the place unlocked?’

‘Yes.’

‘Did that surprise you?’

‘Not particularly.’

‘How did you purpose getting in without a key had you found the place locked?’

‘I hadn’t given it a lot of thought. Frankly, I expected to find the place a

ruin, in which case I'd have got in through a broken window.'

'Was there any furniture?'

'Not a stick.'

'Did you go all over the castle?'

'Not all of it. That would have been a long job. It's a big place, a lot bigger than I expected. I saw as much of it as I thought necessary.'

'Did it occur to you that fishing-boats, from the mainland or elsewhere, might put in there occasionally? In bad weather they might have to stay a while.'

'I didn't see any sign of that. I only saw what I've told you about. But I heard something, and it was this that brought me here.'

'What did you hear?'

'An aircraft.'

Biggles looked up. 'Oh! Tell me how that happened.'

'When I was at the island I slept in my boat. The food was handy, and anyway it was more comfortable than anything I could have found ashore. The second night, shortly after midnight, I was awakened by the sound of an aircraft. It seemed to be getting nearer. It wasn't a big machine. It sounded like a small single-engined job. I went on deck. It was bright moonlight and dead still, but I couldn't see a thing. I'm prepared to swear that machine was over the island. Then the engine died. Wondering what an aircraft was doing there, at night, miles from any regular route, I listened, expecting to hear a crash.'

'You thought the pilot was in trouble and might try to get down?'

'That's exactly what I thought, and surely what anyone would think. Nothing happened. Mind you, there would have to be a fair amount of noise for me to hear it because, while the sea was moderate, the waves were splashing against the rocks. Actually, in the cove I was in a bad place to see anything, being at water level with walls of rock on all sides of me except directly out to sea. I was in my pyjamas, and finding the breeze a bit chilly I went back into the cabin to put on some clothes before having a look round. While I was doing that I heard the aircraft take off. I rushed out again, and by the sound of the engine I could hear the aircraft heading for the mainland.'

'But you couldn't see it?'

'No. It couldn't have been carrying lights or I must have seen it. Well, that's it. There can be no argument about it. That night an aircraft came to the island, landed, and took off again.'

'Where do you suppose it landed?'

'There's only one possible place, and that's the beach.'

'Would that be large enough?'

'Just, for a small machine, provided the wind was right.'

'How was it blowing on that occasion?'

'Due north.'

'So the machine could fly in straight up the beach from the southern end?'

‘Exactly.’

‘Very interesting. Did you do anything about it?’

‘As soon as it was light enough to see I went to the beach and had a good look at it.’

‘Find anything?’

‘Nothing. The tide had half covered the beach during the night and that would have washed out any wheel tracks.’

‘And that’s all?’

‘Practically all. The next night I kept my clothes on and waited near the beach with a torch in my hand. But nothing happened. That’s all I can tell you; but I’m pretty sure something is afoot on my property, something that makes it worth while to run an airplane. I want to know what it is.’

‘You haven’t been back since your first trip?’

‘No.’

‘Did you make further inquiries when you got to the mainland?’

‘No. What would have been the use of that? Some people must know what’s going on. That’s why they tried to stop me getting to the island. There’s a local policeman, but he’s never at home. At least, that’s what I was told. Deciding it was no use wasting any more time there I came here, and the officer I saw below suggested I had a word with you.’

‘Do you intend to go back to Tola?’

‘Sure I’m going back,’ stated Macaster with iron in his voice. ‘Do you suppose I’d let these smart guys run me off my own property? No sir. When I start something I aim to finish it.’

‘You still believe some of the Clan Macaster will return to their own home?’

‘I do. That’s what I’m doing myself, isn’t it? The people of the Highlands and Islands never forget their birthplace. It stays in their blood.’ Macaster shrugged. ‘If they decide to stay away, okay; I’ll run the island myself as a holiday home. There are worse places. With plenty of shooting and fishing I shall be quite happy.’

‘In that case why did you come here to tell us about it?’

‘In the first place to ask for your advice on the broad aspect of the business, and secondly to let someone in authority know what I’m doing in the event of things going wrong.’

‘Go wrong? What could go wrong?’

‘I might disappear. If I did you’d know where to look for me. I’m a rich man, and unless proof of my death could be established my fortune would be put in cold store for years in case I turned up.’

‘Are you married?’

‘No. But I’ve a niece and a nephew in Canada I’d like to have my money.’

Biggles looked at the Air Commodore inquiringly.

His Chief thought for a few moments. ‘As an aircraft that travels at night without navigation lights appears to be involved, I think it might be a good

thing if you ran up and had a look at this island,' he decided. 'You haven't much on and it shouldn't take long. Please yourself how you go about it.'

'As you say, sir.' Biggles got up. 'If you'll come with me to my office, Mr Macaster, we'll go into this a bit further and maybe cook up a plan to find out just what's going on on Tola.'

CHAPTER 2

AN UNEXPECTED SET-BACK

THE new helicopter *Kestrel*, recently brought on the strength of the Air Police for patrol work in Home waters, with a feeble early October sun behind it whirled its way across the grey waters of The Minch, with the Atlantic beyond, towards the outlying Western Isle of Tola, now a smudge low over the horizon. It carried its standard complement of crew and passengers; Biggles at the controls, with Police Pilots Bertie Lissie, Algy Lacey and 'Ginger' Hebblethwaite in the other seats. Rod, as they now called Macaster at his own request after several meetings, was not with them, for reasons that had better be explained.

There were two main reasons. The first was the question of load. Biggles had thought they might wish to stay on the island for a day or two, in which case stores, food in particular, would be needed. For this Rod's little cabin cruiser, *Gannet*, was better equipped than the *Kestrel* with its limited space and four on board. Secondly, it was thought desirable to have an alternative means of transport in case of structural failure, or accident at a time when the aircraft might be grounded by weather conditions. Fog, according to information gathered from Admiralty publications, sometimes persisted for days on end.

Biggles had said he would have more peace of mind if he knew there was a second means of transport to fall back on in an emergency. It was better to be safe than sorry; therefore, after some discussion, it had been decided that Rod should go on ahead, alone, in his boat, taking everything the party would be likely to require during their stay, even though this was likely to be short. Rod himself did not intend to stay longer than was necessary. What their investigations revealed, if anything, would determine the question of his taking up residence. Should he decide to do that, more ambitious preparations would of course have to be made. But all that could come later.

For the present trip a list of foodstuffs had been prepared. These were to be packed in waterproof containers, in case the *Gannet* ran into bad weather and shipped water. There were one or two other things at Biggles's request, such as a few spare cans of aviation spirit, to be on the safe side. If Rod wished to take anything else with a view to extending his stay on the island that was up to him. It was his boat, and his island, so he could take anything he liked within the accommodation of the *Gannet*.

According to the time-table that had been arranged, he should now, weather permitting, have been on the island for two days and nights, an extra day having been allowed for a possible delay.

For the rest, having no idea of what they were likely to encounter, or what might turn up, no definite plans had been made. The police would join Rod on

the island and together they would explore the place thoroughly, mounting a listening post at night should the plane Rod had heard pay the island another visit.

Biggles had not told Rod this, but to the others he made no secret of the possibility that they were on a wild-goose chase; for it was difficult to see for what purpose the island could be used, or what object there could be in preventing it from being reoccupied. The only thing that really concerned Biggles was the mysterious aircraft, the visit of which, by night, showing no lights, implied behaviour which could only be regarded as suspicious. But even this might be an isolated incident, possibly accidental, the pilot having lost his way or his lights having failed. As Biggles was aware, such things do happen. After all, he argued with the others, Rod hadn't seen it; he had only heard it; and alone on a dark night, with hills to throw off echoes, sounds can be deceptive.

Should the machine, allowing that one had in fact landed on the island, make a return visit, it would be an altogether different matter. That would be too remarkable to be ascribed to coincidence. In short, Biggles's main purpose was to see or hear this machine which operated at night without lights; so, as he said, it seemed likely they would have to play a game calling for patience. They could only wait, and watch.

The outlines of Tola became more clearly defined as the *Kestrel* drew nearer. The little beach was conspicuous, as was the short rock jetty at the northern end of it behind which, Rod had told them, was the mooring where, on his previous visit, he had tied up his boat. This was where they expected to find him, there being no safe anchorage. The helicopter would of course have to land on a beach. They could now see there was just enough room for a light plane to land provided the wind was right.

'I can't see him,' said Ginger, meaning Rod, as the *Kestrel*, now low, approached the mooring. 'He may be in the cottage just behind. Even so, he must have heard us by now.'

'I can't see the boat, either, which strikes me as a bit queer,' returned Biggles, frowning. 'There's nowhere else he could have put it. I expected to see him standing by it.'

'I can see him,' stated Bertie. 'He's on his way to the beach. He's going through that birch scrub behind it. He must have been waiting in one of those cottages farther back.'

'I still can't see the boat,' said Biggles, wonderingly. 'What the deuce can he have done with it?'

No more was said. The *Kestrel* stopped, sinking to the ground, and presently came to rest on it. Everyone got out as Rod hurried up and joined them. He carried a double-barrelled twelve-bore sporting gun.

'We'd begun to wonder what had happened to you,' greeted Biggles. 'Is everything all right?'

'Anything but,' answered Rod ruefully.

‘Where’s the boat?’

‘She’s gone to the bottom.’

Biggles stared. ‘She’s *what*?’

‘Sunk.’

‘Where?’

‘At the mooring.’

‘Don’t tell me such a thing!’

‘It’s true.’

‘How did that happen?’

‘That’s what I’d like to know.’

‘But — but — how could such a thing happen?’

‘Search me. She was as right as rain when I left her. When I came back she wasn’t there. I couldn’t believe it. For a minute or two I could only stand there like a fool. Then I spotted her, sitting on the bottom in about ten feet of water.’

‘Did you leave her secure?’

‘Absolutely.’

‘Could she have holed herself, below the water-line, against the rocks?’

‘Not a chance. There’s hardly a ripple where she was moored.’

‘When did this happen?’

‘Some time yesterday.’

‘You say when you came back she’d gone. Had you been somewhere?’

‘As I had nothing to do until you came I thought I’d take a stroll round and try to shoot something for the pot to help out with the grub.’

‘Where did you go?’

‘To the loch. I took a fishing-rod along to see what the fish were like. Lucky for me I did. I knocked off a duck and a rabbit and grassed a nice brace of trout. That’s what I’ve been living on.’

‘Where’s the rod?’

‘I left it by the loch ready for the next time I needed it.’

Biggles looked thoughtful. ‘This is a nice start, I must say. No boat, no grub, no blankets, no nothing.’

‘That’s about it.’

‘What’s your opinion? Could this losing the boat, in any possible way, have been the result of an accident?’

‘I don’t see how it could have been. I left her snug. There’s been no sea to speak of.’

‘Then what did happen?’

‘There’s only one answer to that. Some skunk scuttled her.’

‘Did you see anybody?’

‘Not a soul.’

‘Did you hear anything?’

‘Not a thing except the gulls and the waves breaking.’

‘If she was scuttled there must be somebody here.’

‘Obviously.’

‘You must have been seen walking towards the far end of the island.’

‘I don’t know about that.’

‘Those two shots you fired would be heard, anyway, by anyone here. He’d come out to see what was going on. You’d be spotted going to the loch. That was the chance to sink your boat.’

‘That’s about the size of it.’

‘Let’s go and have a look at the damage,’ decided Biggles abruptly. ‘Can you see this beach from the harbour?’

‘Only a bit of the far end.’

‘If there’s someone here he must have heard the machine arrive, anyhow,’ Bertie pointed out during the short walk to the mooring.

‘In which case he’s likely to be watching us at this moment,’ put in Ginger, with a glance at the skyline above them.

‘We’ll attend to him in due course,’ asserted Biggles. ‘On a place this size he shouldn’t be hard to find. Can the mooring be seen from the castle, Rod?’

‘No. The ground rises too sharply.’

A clamber over some rocks and the mooring lay close below them. ‘This is it,’ said Rod.

Actually, the island’s only harbour, if that word can be used to describe something not much larger than a cattle pen, was of the most primitive description, although when the place was occupied no doubt it was large enough to hold the one or two small craft the islanders would possess.

One side was a natural buttress of rocks ten or twelve feet high, which looked as though it might have been a landslide running into the sea. A short distance from this, to form the opposite side, a mole of rocks, of the same length, had been piled laboriously at an angle to form a breakwater. It was this that cut off the view of the beach. It would obviously serve its purpose except in very stormy weather. A few bollards had been fixed at intervals. Behind, the ground, covered with bracken and tufts of heather, rose some fifty feet to a ridge, which cut off the view of what lay inland. Gulls patrolled up and down endlessly, filling the air with their discordant yet strangely appealing cries.

Standing on the rocks the visitors gazed down through transparent water to the deck of the *Gannet* about five feet below the surface.

Biggles said: ‘How was she tied up?’

Rod answered: ‘As the water was dead calm only by the bows, with a little play to let her swing with the tide rather than have her bump and scratch her paint.’

‘The cable looks as if it’s still attached.’

‘It is.’

‘Isn’t that a bit odd — I mean, if this was sabotage?’

‘I’ve thought about that. I can see two possible reasons. In the first place, had she been cast off it would have been obvious at once that someone had interfered with her. Secondly, had she been free when she was sunk she might

have drifted into the fairway, and by blocking it prevent another boat from getting in.'

'The boat belonging to the man who did this, assuming he sometimes uses a boat?'

'That's how I worked it out.'

'How's the tide?' asked Biggles, looking at the high water mark on the rocks, clearly defined by the limit of the seaweed.

'Going back.'

'What sort of rise and fall do you get here?'

'I haven't paid much attention, but speaking from memory I'd calculate somewhere about five or six feet.'

'Then at low water the top of the cabin should be nearly awash.'

'I guess so. What's on your mind?'

'I see she settled down on even keel.'

'What of it?'

'I was thinking, had she accidently knocked a hole in her side I imagine she would have gone down with a list.'

'She couldn't have holed herself.'

'Why not?'

'I've handled boats before so I'm not entirely a landlubber. I hung out fenders, fore, aft, and amidships. I say she must have been scuttled.'

'How?'

'Somebody opened the sea-cock. That would account for her settling down dead level. What are the chances of raising her, do you reckon?' Rod asked the question anxiously.

'As far as we're concerned, if that's what you mean, not a hope. For a salvage team with proper tackle it would be a simple job. If we attempted even to move her we'd probably do more harm than good. I take it she was insured?'

'Sure. She was fully covered when I bought her. I'm not worried about that.'

'Then strictly speaking the insurance people should be told right away what has happened. That would mean salvage people here and all sorts of complications. But we'll talk about that presently. I feel inclined to try something else first.'

'What sort of complications?' Rod wanted to know.

'Well, if it was found she'd been bumped against the rock, and sprung a leak, that would be understandable. That might happen to any craft. But suppose it was discovered that the sea-cock had been opened; in other words, that the boat had been deliberately scuttled, imagine the questions that would lead to. There might even be a suspicion that you'd done it yourself.'

Rod glared. 'What the—'

'Could you prove there was someone here who did it?'

'Well — er — I suppose not.'

‘That’s what I mean. But we’re wasting time. Algy, I want you to fly home and tell the Air Commodore what has happened.’

‘Here, half a mo, old boy,’ put in Bertie. ‘What do we use for grub while he’s away? I mean to say, wild duck with nothing else is going to be pretty tough chewing.’

Biggles turned to him. ‘What do you expect with it — gravy? If you’re thinking of green peas and new potatoes, forget it. Just let me finish what I was going to say.’ He turned back to Algy. ‘Tell the Chief what has happened, what we know and what we suspect. Having done that, ask him if he can lay on a Royal Navy frogman to find out why the *Gannet* went to the bottom. If nothing else he could salvage some of the grub for us. If it was properly packed in watertight containers, as I ordered, it should be all right.’

‘Is that all?’

‘No. If the Air Commodore can persuade the Navy to send over a salvage crew to raise the boat so much the better. The Navy is bound to have equipment somewhere on the West Coast, and we’ve helped them often enough. It may not be necessary for you to go all the way home. You’ll have to land somewhere to refuel, so see what you can do on the phone. Point out that I feel this isn’t the moment to bring civil salvage people to Tola. Get back as soon as you can. We’ll come with you to the machine and take out the iron rations and anything else likely to be useful.’

‘Am I doing this trip alone?’ inquired Algy.

‘Yes. The less weight the machine has to carry the more grub you’ll be able to bring back. I leave that to you. You’ll know what we’re likely to want. I’d rather not have to rely on Rod’s gun.’

‘I’ve only six cartridges left in my pocket, anyway,’ informed Rod.

‘Chuck in a few loaves of bread, old boy,’ pleaded Bertie. ‘I do like my bread. And a spot of fresh butter to fry the trout in.’

‘What are you going to use for frying the trout in, anyway?’ inquired Biggles.

‘I can help you there,’ put in Rod. ‘Rather than make a fug cooking in the cabin I took one or two things ashore, among them a frying-pan for bacon and eggs. There’s also a kettle, a teapot, my fishing-tackle bag and one or two odds and ends.’

‘That’s fine,’ declared Biggles. ‘Where are they?’

Rod jerked a thumb. ‘In that wreck of a cottage just behind us, to keep ‘em out of the rain. It was raining when I got here.’ He stopped and looked at Biggles with a strange expression on his face. ‘Just a minute. This has reminded me of something. Now I *know* there’s somebody here — unless the gulls have taken to drinking bottled beer.’

Biggles stared. ‘What are you talking about?’

Rod explained. ‘When I left here on my shooting trip, reckoning I’d be thirsty when I got back I put ashore a bottle of beer, an opener and a glass. Under the shock of seeing the boat had disappeared I clean forgot the beer.’

‘Where did you put it?’

‘On that flat rock you’re standing on now. It’s a ready-made seat.’

‘Well, it isn’t here now.’

‘That’s what I mean. The skunk who sank my boat must have scoffed my beer.’

‘You’re quite sure you put it on that rock?’

‘Absolutely certain. No doubt about it.’

There was silence for a minute while this significant piece of information was digested. Then Biggles said: ‘Then there must be somebody here. I wonder what he did with the bottle. Did he take it away with him or did he drink the beer on the spot? If he drank it here he’d throw the bottle away.’

‘What’s the use of an empty bottle?’ asked Rod, with gentle sarcasm. ‘It’d be smashed if it fell on the rocks, anyhow.’

Biggles did not answer. He began searching between the boulders near the flat rock. The others joined him in the search. Some glass was found that might have been the tumbler. Presently Rod called: ‘Here it is. Not broken, either.’ He stooped as if to pick it up.

‘Don’t touch it,’ said Biggles quickly.

Rod looked up, startled. ‘What’s the idea? I thought you wanted it.’

‘I do.’ Biggles took out his handkerchief and covering his hand with it picked up the bottle.

‘Like I said, it’s empty,’ observed Rod.

‘Never mind the beer, it’s the bottle I want,’ answered Biggles. ‘A man would have to be a magician to take the cap off a bottle of beer without leaving his finger-prints on it. There’s just a chance this may tell us something. Another little job for you, Algy. Get this to the Fingerprint Bureau at the Yard and ask ‘em if they can identify an old customer.’

‘I get it,’ acknowledged Algy.

‘All right. Now we’ll get on with the job. Let’s go back to the machine. It may be a good thing it isn’t staying here, or we’d have to put a guard on it in case our unknown friend tried to scuttle that, too.’ Biggles studied the rising ground behind him. ‘If he doesn’t see us go back to the machine he may suppose we’ve all gone off in it, and thinking he again has the place to himself, come into the open. I can’t see anybody, but I wouldn’t expect to unless the fellow’s crazy. Let’s go. Careful with that bottle, Algy.’

As they walked along the short strip of beach Biggles went on: ‘You know, there’s one thing that puzzles me about this business. What was the object of scuttling the *Gannet*?’

‘To maroon me here, what else?’ answered Rod.

‘I’d have thought that was the last thing the man responsible would have wanted. I’d have supposed he’d be only too anxious to see you push off and leave him alone.’

‘Maybe he thought I’d starve to death, which might easily happen to anyone cast away here. He wasn’t to know I had a gun, and with it could keep

going at least for some time.'

'I wonder could he have been tipped off that you were on the way here. Have you seen a boat of any sort near the island?'

'No. There hasn't been one. I'd swear to that.'

'You couldn't see both sides of the island at the same time.'

'I've told you a landing is impossible on the far side. I was always on this side, and a boat couldn't get in anywhere else.'

'Maybe that aircraft you heard brought a warning you were on the way here, or had been talking of coming here.'

'Could be.'

'Now let me ask a question,' requested Ginger. 'You keep saying "he", as if you were sure there was only one man here. Why shouldn't there be two of 'em, or three, or even more?'

'You make a point,' conceded Biggles. 'Maybe we're wrong in assuming there's only one. That's something we shall prove one way or another in due course.'

'Then you intend to stay here?' queried Rod.

'Of course. We're not in the habit of leaving a job half done. I'm beginning to get really interested, anyway. But here we are. Let's unload anything we're likely to want so that Algy can get away.'

'What are you going to do with the stuff?' asked Bertie.

'We might as well take it along to that cottage Rod has been using, unless we can find somewhere better.'

'What about the castle, old boy? I've always wanted to live in a castle.'

Biggles answered seriously. 'I think, at the moment, that would be a good place to keep away from.'

'You think our unknown friend, or friends, might have jumped our claim?'

'It's a possibility.'

'This Robinson Crusoe stuff is going to be a bit draughty,' sighed Bertie, as Algy started to hand things out of the *Kestrel*. First came the small carton containing the emergency rations.

'What's in that?' asked Rod, curiously.

'Biscuits, a couple of cans of bully beef, tins of butter, jam, sugar, cheese, condensed milk and tea.'

'What's the idea of humping that round with you?'

'Call it force of habit. It doesn't take up much room. We sometimes find ourselves in queer spots, with no restaurant round the corner; not normally in this machine, but on long-range jobs. As it happens this is a case in point. Algy, you'll find a hundred box of cigarettes in the pocket by my seat. I'll have them. And the haversacks with our small kit. No reason why we shouldn't wash occasionally.' Biggles threw Rod a smile. 'We always keep civilized as long as possible.'

'Want the binoculars?' queried Algy, from the cabin.

'Yes. They might well come in handy. And we'll have our pistols out of

the magazine with a few clips of bullets.'

'Do you really think you might need those?' asked Rod, raising his eyebrows.

'I hope not, but a man who's prepared to scuttle an expensive boat would probably go further if he thought he had nothing to lose — or something to gain. I hate lumbering myself up with ironmongery, but there are occasions on our job when a gun can be a more effective argument than words. I'm nothing for fist fighting.'

The unloading continued until everything thought likely to be of use lay in a heap on the beach. Biggles put an electric torch in his pocket.

'Okay, Algy, that's the lot,' he called. 'Away you go. Get back as soon as you can, but don't take chances. We shall be all right.'

Algy waved a hand, closed the door, and in a couple of minutes was in the air, swinging out over the sullen water.

'Let's get this stuff to our nice little lodging, all mod. cons, laid on and right facing the sea, as they say in the advertisements,' ordered Biggles cheerfully. 'Rent free into the bargain. What more do we want?'

'I want a castle,' said Bertie plaintively.

'Perhaps Rod will let you live in this one when he's got it tidied up,' returned Biggles consolingly.

CHAPTER 3

FIRST PRECAUTIONS

THE little grey dwelling, squat, ugly, colourless, its reed-thatched roof crumbling and sagging at the eaves and wearing the forlorn expression of something abandoned and forgotten, was not as uncomfortable inside as Ginger expected. It consisted of a single room, with its feet in the heather, standing four square to the winds of heaven which it had been built to endure. The doorway, although some of the unmortared stones had slipped awry, still seemed to brace itself in an attitude of defiance. A small lean-to attached to the side of the house had apparently been the toilet. A short distance away an untidy heap had obviously been the rubbish dump.

Inside the living-room the floor was bare earth, hard packed from generations of use. There was a simple stone fire-place, no oven, but with two iron bars across the top to carry a pot. Close to it lay a little pile of kindling sticks which Rod said he had gathered. The only article that might, with a little imagination, come into the category of furniture, was a log about four feet long which must have been washed ashore some time in the past. Hewn flat on top it might have been used as a table or a seat. Two long niches had been built into the walls. One of them was half filled with dead bracken.

‘That’s been my bed,’ said Rod, smiling.

‘Just the job,’ replied Biggles.

‘That was what it was intended for in the first place. The folks who once lived here had more sense than to go upstairs into a cold bedroom. They had only one floor. They stayed where a peat fire was burning and never allowed to go out.’

‘Must have been a bit of a fug,’ suggested Bertie.

‘Better a fug than freeze in your bed,’ said Rod.

Signs of his occupation were there; the few culinary utensils he had brought ashore, a can of fresh water, and, what pleased Biggles most, a primus stove. ‘That’s grand,’ he said. ‘Just what we need.’

‘What’s grand about it?’ asked Rod.

‘We can boil a kettle without lighting a fire.’

‘What’s wrong with lighting a fire, anyhow?’

‘Fires make smoke.’

‘So what. Any reason why I shouldn’t make as much smoke as I like on my own property?’

‘I’m not ready yet to inform our unknown neighbour that we’re here.’

‘But he’ll know all about that when we go to the castle.’

‘Who said anything about going to the castle?’

Rod looked surprised. ‘I thought that’d be the first thing you’d do.’

‘Not on your nellie. That may come later, but for the moment I’m not

chasing anyone round your castle walls. I'd rather he came to us.'

'Surely that's a bit optimistic. What gives you the idea that he'll come looking for us?'

'Common sense plus a little knowledge of human nature. In a tricky situation it's often a good thing to put yourself in the position of the other bloke. Judging from what you yourself would do, can give you a lead as to what he's likely to do. In our case let's put it like this. First we must assume that the rat who nobbled your boat is still here. We may be wrong. If we are we shall soon know. Anyway, for the sake of argument let's say he's still here. It's reasonable to suppose he'll be just as anxious to know what we're doing as we are to know what *his* game is. At the moment he can't even be sure you're here. He must have heard our machine come in. It's likely that he saw it, in which case he'd realize it had landed on the beach. You can't see the castle from the beach, so it follows you can't see the beach from the castle.'

Biggles paused. 'Are you with me so far?'

'Sure. You're so right.'

'Very well. This is where he starts wondering. What's the aircraft doing? Why has it come here? How many people came with it? And so on. He'd probably jump to the most obvious conclusion; that you made some provision to be picked up if things went wrong, or maybe bring in some extra stores. Presently he sees the aircraft take off again. That is bound to leave him wondering whether you've gone or are still here. I'd wager that at this very moment he's staring in this direction, hoping that if there is somebody here he'll show himself. Eventually, when nothing happens, his curiosity will get the better of him, and he'll do a spot of scouting to settle the question. Until he's done that he'll have to think twice before he lights a fire to brew himself a cup of tea, because a fire means smoke, and that would tell anyone here, if there was somebody here, exactly where he was. So, I say, this is where we play a little game of cat and mouse. He's the mouse. We're the cat. If we wait long enough the mouse will come out of its hole. We can afford to wait. It'll be two or three days before Algy can get back. Thinking things over I may have missed an opportunity there.'

'How?'

'Before he left I should have asked Algy to make a circuit of the island, keeping low.'

'It's unlikely he would have seen anyone.'

'Agreed; but it would have suggested you were having a last look round before leaving. However, it doesn't matter. It wasn't important. At the moment I have a feeling inside that tells me it's past lunch time. Let's have something to eat. We shall have to go light on rations, though, in case Algy is delayed. Ginger, you might be opening some of these tins and get the kettle boiling.' Biggles got up. 'By the way, Rod, where do you get your drinking water?'

'There are several springs in the bank behind us.'

‘What are you going to do?’ asked Ginger.

‘Have a look round.’ Biggles turned back to Rod. ‘Can we see the castle from the top of this ridge behind us?’

‘Sure.’

‘Then I’d like to have a look at the lie of the land. Moreover, there’s just a chance that your undesirable tenant may already be on his way here, or to some point from which he can get a squint at the harbour. We’d look silly if we were taken by surprise.’

‘Okay.’

Biggles picked up the binoculars. ‘Roughly how far is it from the ridge to the castle?’

‘I’d say getting on for half a mile.’

‘All right. Let’s go. You’ve been around, so you can show me the landmarks.’

Accompanied by Rod, Biggles set off up the sloping bank towards the ridge that cut off their view of the interior of the island.

They kept flat for the last part, and finally dragged themselves to a position from which, peering through a screen of rough herbage, they could see what lay beyond the ridge. It was not an attractive prospect. For the most part the ground lay open and windswept, carpeted with heather but with occasional patches of wiry green rushes, indicating the damp spots. In short, it was typical Highland terrain. The ground appeared to be level, but it fell from the higher parts in a series of gentle undulations; which, as Biggles realized, meant that the hollows could conceal any number of people.

There were only two buildings in sight. Rising clear against the distant skyline they were conspicuous. One was the castle, and the other, from its shape, was unmistakably the abandoned lighthouse.

The naked eye, revealing nothing more, Biggles took the binoculars from their case, and having taken the precaution of pulling out the shades to prevent the lenses from glinting, focused them. It took him some minutes to survey the buildings and reconnoitre the intervening ground.

‘See anything of interest?’ asked Rod.

‘Not a thing. Not a movement anywhere. Not a smudge of smoke. Take a look for yourself.’ He passed the glasses.

Rod took a turn and presently confirmed what Biggles had said. ‘If there’s anyone at this end of the island he must be inside the castle, or possibly the lighthouse,’ he surmised.

‘Where are the cottages you told us about?’

‘In a hollow a bit to the left of us.’

‘And the loch?’

‘That’s still farther to the left. The stream that runs out of it reaches the sea at the southern end.’

‘Some way from the castle?’

‘Yes. Two miles or more.’

‘Good. Let’s go back.’

They returned to the house to find such food as was available, and a pot of tea, waiting for them.

‘Anything doing, old boy?’ asked Bertie.

‘No sign of the enemy so far,’ returned Biggles. With a glance at Rod he went on: ‘Was there anything left of the game you shot?’

‘Only the bones and I threw those into the sea. I would have gone out hunting again this morning, but I daren’t leave the beach in case you turned up. Why? Would you like me to go out and knock off the odd bird or a rabbit?’

‘What we have here isn’t going to last four hungry men very long unless we go on a starvation diet, but I don’t think we should do any shooting just yet. Once the enemy knows we’re here it won’t matter. We’ll give him till tomorrow morning to show his hand.’

‘What are you going to do this afternoon?’ inquired Ginger.

‘Nothing. Lie low and keep my eyes open. There’s no need for us all to do that, though. As I said before, one can fish without making a noise, so I suggest, Rod, you walk as far as the loch or the river and try for a salmon or one or two sea-trout. That would help out with the grub stakes. You know your way about; can you get to the river without being seen from the castle?’

‘I think so. As I told you, I left the rod there. I could try it.’

‘Fair enough. You can take Bertie with you. Ginger will stay here with me.’

‘Talking of fish,’ said Bertie, ‘there should be some cracking good lobsters round the rocks. If there’s one dish that makes me smack my lips it’s lobster, hot, cold, or anyhow.’

‘This is neither the time nor place for pandering to your expensive tastes,’ replied Biggles. ‘What we want is good solid food. You can amuse yourself groping for lobsters when we’ve got this business buttoned up.’

‘We may be late back,’ put in Rod.

‘Why?’

‘Sea-trout take best around sundown.’

‘I don’t care how long you take as long as you bring something home with you. While you’re away we’ll get our stuff out of sight, under some bracken, or something, so that it can’t be seen whatever happens. If we lost it we *should* be in a mess. Let’s have a look at how far the tide has gone down.’

Going out they found it at full ebb, or practically so, for the top of the cabin, the highest part of the *Gannet*, was only a few inches below the surface. Indeed, the water was eddying over it.

‘Where did you stow your stores?’ Ginger asked Rod.

‘There are lockers fore and aft.’

‘You get into them from the cabin?’

‘Yes. Why?’

‘With the water at this level I think I could get in and salvage a few things.’

Biggles shook his head. 'Better not try that. You might find yourself trapped. It might be worth considering if we were pushed really hard for food, but things haven't come to that yet. 'I'd rather not take the risk at present.'

'I can't see that there's much risk,' argued Ginger.

'For all we know she might be nicely balanced on the rocks below and your weight moving about might cause her to roll over. Leave it for the time being, anyhow.'

Rod said: 'If there's nothing more we can do here we might as well get on after the fish.'

'Okay. Be careful not to show yourselves. Keep away from skylines.'

'Sure.'

Rod and Bertie set off, making their way by the beach.

Biggles turned back to the house. 'We'll take turns to keep guard,' he told Ginger.

'After all these precautions we'd look silly if it turned out there was nobody here after all,' returned Ginger lightly.

'We'd look sillier if when our backs were turned some swine slipped in and pinched our grub and our gear,' retorted Biggles. 'You take the glasses, creep up to the ridge and cover the landscape. Keep dead still. In open country like this the slightest movement catches the eye of anyone watching. If you spot anything suspicious give me a whistle. I'll relieve you in an hour. Meanwhile I'll get our stuff out of sight and lay in a stock of dry bracken for beds.'

'Fair enough.' With the binoculars out of their case and hanging by their strap on his chest Ginger went off up the bank. Creeping the last few yards to the ridge he gazed out across a picture of sombre green, unbroken by a movement, that might have pleased a hunter with a gun but left him without any such enthusiasm. He settled down to watch.

Biggles busied himself with his task, arranging their belongings in a corner and then fetching quantities of bracken to cover them. This done he brought in more dry stuff which he strewed about the floor for beds, leaving the middle of the room clear. This occupied him for the best part of an hour, when he joined Ginger on the ridge.

'See anything?' he inquired.

'Not a sausage. The place looks deadlier than dead to me.'

'It may look like that, but I'm pretty sure it isn't.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'Aren't you forgetting the boat? Somebody scuttled it, and whoever did that is still here. As Rod has neither heard a plane nor seen a boat since that happened, unless the skunk has wings, I don't see how he could have left the island. The arrival of our machine must have been outside his calculations. It's given him something to think about and he's gone to earth to ponder the possibilities.'

'That's right enough.'

They watched together for a time without seeing anything more interesting than some wild duck rise from the direction of the loch.

‘I imagine Rod and Bertie put ‘em up,’ observed Biggles casually.

Then Ginger went down, and a whistle some time later told Biggles that he had made a pot of tea. Biggles came down, and Ginger, having had his tea, went up again.

Guard was maintained until seven o’clock, by which time dusk had closed in to dim the scene, and as it was no longer possible to see anything clearly there was no point in continuing to watch. Ginger had a last look round, his eyes striving to probe the gloom, and decided he had never seen anything more dismal, more depressing. The sky had become overcast and there was a chill in the air. It felt damp, as if rain was not far away. He was more than a little glad they had a shelter, rude though it was, for the night.

‘Rod and Bertie are a long time,’ he remarked, when he rejoined Biggles, whom he found had taken up a position at the door of the house, seated on a rock which he had found or brought up from below.

‘Keep your voice down,’ requested Biggles. ‘From now we shall have to rely on our ears.’

‘Nobody will come here now,’ declared Ginger confidently.

‘On the contrary, this is just about the time I’d expect a visit. I hope this cloud will break up to let a little light through, otherwise we shan’t see much, anyway. I’m not going to risk using a light outside. Inside the house it won’t matter, because it could only be seen from directly out to sea. Did you by any chance notice a light at the castle?’

‘Not a glimmer. If there’s anyone there he’s not showing lights, either.’

‘He could have all the light he wanted in one of the inside rooms, if it comes to that. What the devil are our chaps doing? I know Rod said they might be late, but I didn’t expect them to be as late as this.’

Biggles went into the house to light a cigarette. Thereafter they sat and waited for the most part in silence. Darkness fell from the sky. There was no sound except the eternal lapping and gurgling of the waves among the rocks below, the gulls, apparently, having retired to their night quarters.

Biggles moved uneasily. ‘I don’t like this,’ he muttered. ‘I hope our fishing party is all right. They should have been back before this. Rod knows the place, so they can hardly have lost their way.’

‘What could happen to them?’

‘A good many things. They might have got stuck in a bog, bitten by an adder, broken a leg on some rocks, or, having got off their track, gone over a cliff. There’s only one beach.’

Ginger did not answer. He was thinking the same thing.

It was shortly after this that not far away a game bird rose with a whirr of wings and a squawk of alarm. Ginger was about to say here they come when Biggles’s hand fell on his knee and pressed it. ‘*Ssh,*’ he breathed.

They waited, and as they sat in silence Ginger realized that the sound had

come from the wrong direction for it to have been caused by the approach of Rod or Bertie. It seemed to have come from somewhere behind them. It certainly hadn't come from the beach, the route Rod would almost certainly take.

It seemed a long time before anything happened. Indeed, Ginger had decided in his mind that the fowl had been disturbed by a fox, or some other predatory creature, when a voice spoke, so close that his nerves twitched. It said two words. 'He's gone.'

Another voice, this with a Scots accent, said: 'Aye. Seems like you were richt. He's awa.'

After a pause the first voice spoke again. 'We needn't waste time here. We might have a look round in daylight. Let's get back.'

'He'll no come here again, ye're thinking?'

'Unless he's a fool, not now he sees what happens.'

The other man did not seem so sure. 'I ken these Macasters. They're no fools.'

This was followed by sounds of the men scrambling up the bank. They made a lot more noise than they had coming, supposing, presumably, there was no longer any need for caution.

'Now what about it?' breathed Biggles in Ginger's ear.

'How right you were,' acknowledged Ginger.

The whole incident had lasted only a few minutes, and during that critical period the thought that had exercised his mind was, what would happen should Rod and Bertie return before the men had gone? Luckily this did not happen, but it was a near thing. Within a very short time their voices could be heard coming from the direction of the beach. Soon afterwards they walked up, and even in the darkness it could be seen that Bertie was carrying a long, light-coloured object.

'You've been a deuce of a time,' challenged Biggles. 'What have you got there?'

'Sea-trout, old boy. Beauty. A whopper. Eight or nine pounder, we reckon. And three smaller ones. The big feller was the last. That's why we're so late. The blighter wouldn't give up. Half the time, in the dark, we couldn't even see where he was among the rocks.'

'He certainly put up a great fight,' confirmed Rod. 'If we hadn't been so hard up for grub I'd have put him back.'

'I'm glad you didn't,' said Biggles shortly. 'I appreciate your sporting sentiments, but we've got to eat.'

'Any visitors?' asked Bertie casually, evidently not expecting the answer he got.

'Yes, they came along,' said Biggles.

There was a brief shocked silence. Then: 'Did you say *they*?' queried Rod, in a curious voice.

'There were two of 'em. Had you been a few minutes earlier you'd have

bumped right into them.'

'Did they see you?'

'No. We were ready for them.'

'Did they say anything?'

'Not much. They came to make sure you'd gone. That's what they believe. It suits us, although it can't be long before they realize they were mistaken.'

'Well, blow me down,' breathed Bertie. 'Any idea who these types were?'

'We couldn't see them, only hear them. Judging from their voices, one was an Englishman and the other a Scot, apparently a local; I mean from the mainland, since he happened to know Rod by name — and the Macasters generally, I gathered.'

'Well, now we know how we stand, what's our next move?' inquired Rod.

'That will need thinking about,' replied Biggles. 'I don't feel like doing anything tonight, so when you've had some supper we might as well turn in.'

'Do you think we ought to mount a guard?' asked Bertie.

'I don't think that's necessary. Now they're satisfied there's nobody here, they aren't likely to come back before daylight, and I shall be about by the crack of dawn,' concluded Biggles.

CHAPTER 4

CURIOUS DEVELOPMENTS

GINGER awoke from a deep sleep with a start, aware that something had awakened him. He did not move, but was very much alert, listening for a repetition of the sound which he thought had awakened him. He was not sure what it was, but in a vague sort of way he thought it was a call, a shout, some distance away. He had no idea of the time, but it was still dark, pitch dark, so dark that he couldn't see the doorway, although the door had been left open. Not even a star showed, indicating the sky was solid overcast. Still listening, he sat up, trying to get his bearings, as one sometimes does in a strange room.

Biggles must also have been awake, and heard him move, for his voice came quietly out of the darkness. 'Don't make a noise and don't strike a light.'

'What goes on?'

'I don't know, but something's happening — on the beach, I think. It isn't at the far end, which is as much as we can see of it from here even in daylight. I imagine anyone moving in this black-out would be using a light; but I haven't seen one.'

By this time the conversation had awakened the others. They, naturally, demanded an explanation of the disturbance.

Biggles repeated what he had told Ginger. 'I'm pretty sure it was a shout that woke me up,' he said. 'If we listen we may hear something.'

'You haven't seen anything?' queried Rod.

'Not a thing. The clouds are right down and it's drizzling with rain. You can't see your hand in front of your face. We could only see a fraction of the beach from here, anyway, on account of the rocks, so if there were lights showing we wouldn't see them.'

'You've no idea what's happening?'

'Not a clue.'

'How about climbing up the rocks to investigate?'

'In these conditions? Not on your life. Those rocks are slippery enough when they're dry. Now they're wet they'd be a death trap. One might manage it with a light; but as the light would be seen by anyone below I can see no sense in that. We don't want them to know we're here.'

'You say *them*?'

'If someone shouted it must have been to somebody else, and that adds up to two — at least.'

'What's the time?' asked Bertie.

'A bit after four o'clock.'

'Must be about high water.'

'Should be.'

‘Where are you? I can’t see a bally thing.’

‘Over here, at the door.’

Everyone groped his way to the door, guided by Biggles’s voice.

Ginger listened. At first he could hear nothing except the breaking of the waves on the beach; but presently he thought he could faintly hear another sound between the regular splashes. Human voices, talking. Once, too, he made out a cry followed by a curious bump, as if two objects had collided.

Rod must have heard this, for he said, definitely: ‘There’s somebody on the beach all right. What the devil can be going on at this hour of night?’

Time went on. Five minutes, ten, twenty; but there were no more sounds.

‘I guess they must have gone,’ said Rod.

‘How about me trying to get a dekkko, old boy?’ offered Bertie.

‘Stay where you are,’ ordered Biggles. ‘Fixed as we are, I’m not risking broken bones.’

They listened a little while longer and then, hearing nothing, they backed into the room. ‘Whatever was going on I fancy it’s all over, so there’s no point in getting wet through,’ said Biggles. ‘If we’re in for a spell of this sort of weather we’d never get our things dry.’

‘Sure,’ agreed Rod. ‘I guess we should have brought mackintoshes.’

‘We can see that now, but we weren’t to know how things were going to turn out. Losing the boat, for instance.’

‘It’s all a mighty queer business.’

‘It’ll sort itself out if we have a little patience,’ predicted Biggles. ‘This rain is a nuisance, but there is this about it. With visibility nil we can make as much smoke as we like, so there’s no reason why we shouldn’t light the fire. I don’t feel like going back to bed. It’ll start to get light in an hour or so. This is our opportunity to cook our fish and start the day with a good breakfast. Put the kettle on the primus, Ginger. A cup of tea will warm us up.’

Bertie spoke. ‘But look here, old boy. Eating hot trout with the bare fingers is going to be a disgusting business.’

‘You don’t have to eat it hot. The thing is to get the stuff cooked while it’s safe to have a fire. Have yours cold if you prefer it that way. You’d better start carrying a napkin around with you. Meanwhile you can lend a hand by gutting the fish and knocking off their heads and tails. That’ll shorten them a bit and make them easier to cook. You’d better do that outside or we shall have the table looking like a cat’s breakfast.’

‘Mind if I take the torch to make sure I don’t take off any fingers or thumbs at the same time?’

‘Not in the least. In this miserable drizzle an arc lamp wouldn’t be seen outside twenty yards.’

Ginger, who had stuffed some dry bracken into the fire-place, lit it with a small silver gas lighter which Bertie had given him for a birthday present. Still being a new toy he used it on every possible occasion, which had become something of a joke with the others. Having got the bracken going he added

some kindling.

‘That’s better,’ remarked Biggles as the flickering flames at once dispelled the gloom and made the place look moderately comfortable. ‘We’re lucky to have a roof over our heads.’

Bertie took the torch, and with the fish went outside.

After being away for some time he returned not only with the fish but with a strange assortment of crockery, which on being placed on the table turned out to be half a dish and some broken plates.

A grin spread slowly over Biggles’s face. ‘Jolly good! Where did you find those?’

‘On the midden.’

Biggles’s expression changed. ‘The what?’

‘Don’t worry. The rubbish dump. I remembered seeing some crocks there. Not exactly a luxury dinner service, but better than eating off the floor like a dog.’

‘I hope you washed them thoroughly.’

‘That’s why I’ve been so long. Messy job.’

By this time Rod had the fish over the fire, which he fed with small pieces of stick. They began to sizzle, filling the air with an appetizing aroma.

‘There’s no fish to touch a sea-trout fresh from the river,’ he declared. ‘By the way, Biggles, have you made any sort of a plan?’ he went on, as they waited for the fish to be done. Ginger had already made the tea.

‘Before this business on the beach I had two schemes in mind,’ replied Biggles. ‘I was trying to work out which was the better, when I realized it was raining and that answered the first question for me. It seemed there were two main courses open to us. We could either wait here for the enemy to show up, or we could take the bull by the horns and go to look for them, starting at the castle. I was inclined to adopt the former method, and as a matter of fact I still am, for two reasons. Firstly, we’re in no great hurry, and secondly, I’d like to hear what Algy has to say when he gets back before we show our hand. To tackle the castle openly has this disadvantage. As there’s no cover round it, the enemy would almost certainly see us coming and either go into hiding or make preparations which might be unpleasant, possibly starting a war which I’d prefer to avoid.’

‘We’ve got guns,’ said Rod belligerently. ‘This is my property, so I’d be within my rights in evicting trespassers.’

‘Evicting them is one thing. Shooting ‘em is another. Our guns are for self-defence only, and there’d be a fine old stink if we started littering the place with bodies — maybe including our own. We’ll delay that as long as possible. This business may come to a show-down at the finish, but until your uninvited guests start cutting up rough I’d rather play the game the soft way.’

‘In this rain we could probably get to the castle without being seen,’ remarked Ginger.

‘True enough, but we’d get soaked to the skin. In the ordinary way I don’t

mind getting my shirt wet, but in our present circumstances I'd rather keep it dry. Sleeping in wet clothes wouldn't make life here any more comfortable. Anyway, we can do nothing in the dark. Let's wait for daylight, when we may get an idea of what the weather's likely to do, before we make a final decision. As soon as it's light enough to see what we're doing, before I do anything else I want to have a look at the beach. There may be something to give us an inkling of what went on there in the early hours.'

'Like you say,' agreed Rod. 'I think the smaller fish are about ready, so we might as well get 'em inside us. We can leave the big guy to get cold and have it later on.'

The trout, served on Bertie's plates, were voted excellent, and, well fed, everyone was in good heart when the grey light of dawn came creeping through the open doorway. The drizzle persisted, although it was now no more than a thick clammy mist which would be just as wetting as rain. The sky was obviously still heavily overcast, or else the clouds were down to sea level, but a slight breeze promised to move them in the not too distant future. The sea-gulls appeared and began their daily quest for food.

'Better douse the fire, now, Rod,' requested Biggles. 'It might be putting up enough smoke to be seen should the air clear suddenly.'

When the light became a little stronger he took the binoculars and went out, saying he would now take a chance on the rocks to get a view of the entire beach. He was not away for very long. When he came back he said: 'There's nothing there now. At least, I couldn't see anything from the top of the rocks. I doubt if it's possible to see the castle from here, but you might take the glasses to the ridge, Ginger, to see if you can make anything of it. You might get a rough idea of the general conditions. Visibility seems to be improving a bit, and as this front seems to be coming in from the west the castle may be in the clear before we are.'

'Okay.' Ginger took the binoculars and went off up the bank.

The air was still thick, but when he reached the ridge he found visibility better than he expected. As Biggles had anticipated, the clouds to the west were thinning sufficiently for a few feeble, very watery, rays of sunlight to break through; but they were still ominously dark, promising more rain. He could not see the castle, which was still in mist. The intervening ground presented the usual bleak and dreary picture. He waited, and his patience was rewarded when the sun broke through for a moment to reveal the grey silhouette of the castle. He raised his glasses. A movement near it caught his eye and he concentrated on it. Then the break in the clouds closed up again and everything was blotted out.

Deciding he had seen all there was to see for the moment, he turned to go back to the house. This, of course, brought him facing the sea. Looking out over it, certainly not expecting to see anything, he stopped in his tracks when his eyes picked up a single object on the dark water, conspicuous for that reason. It was a boat, or to be more precise, a sail. One sail, quite small, which

could only mean a small boat. He realized it was too far out to be seen from the house. It was only his height that enabled him to see it. There could be no doubt about what it was, and he put up his binoculars. They told him nothing more, and even as he watched the object faded into the murk.

He made his best time down to the house. 'There's a boat in the offing,' he announced crisply.

Biggles sprang up. 'What sort of a boat?'

'I wouldn't know. I can only tell you it carried a sail. In fact, that was all I could see. If you asked me to guess I'd say it was a small fishing-boat. You wouldn't see it from down here. I was just below the ridge. It's gone now, anyway. I only caught a glimpse of it as it disappeared in a rain squall.'

'Could you judge which way it was going?'

'Had it been coming towards the island it would have remained in view, so I imagine it was going away from us.'

'Towards the mainland?'

'Yes.'

Biggles lit a cigarette. 'That's very interesting. Of course, the boat could have been fishing, although it seems unlikely it would be out here on its own in this sort of weather. Against that, it might explain the noises we heard on the beach during the night. That's more likely. If that boat landed here it wasn't fishing, you can bet on that. At least, I can't think of any reason why honest fishermen should risk damaging their boat by landing on a place like this in the middle of the night.'

'Unless some guy was on the beach to show 'em a light,' said Rod softly.

'I think you've got something there,' answered Biggles. 'If you're right that boat must have been expected. In other words, the men on the boat met someone here by appointment. That would explain the voices on the beach; but it's not much use trying to guess what it was all about. With any luck we shall know that in due course. Could you see the castle, Ginger?'

'I was able to get a short glimpse of it during a break in the clouds. Which reminds me. Seeing the boat put it out of my mind. I could see a horse.'

'A *what*?'

'A horse. Well, call it a pony.'

'Are you sure it wasn't a deer?' put in Rod.

'Oh, have a heart,' protested Ginger. 'Where do you think I've been all my life that I don't know the difference between a horse and a deer? The beast I saw wasn't wearing spikes on its head.'

'It might have been a hind. They don't carry antlers, either.'

'The animal I saw was close against the castle. It looked to be grazing. Would a wild deer of any sort go close to a house?'

'Most unlikely if the house was occupied.'

'Oh, for Pete's sake let's not argue about it,' broke in Biggles. 'Ginger says it was a horse, and he should know the difference between a horse and a deer by now. Would any horses, which might have gone wild, be left here when

the people departed, Rod?’

‘Not being here at the time I couldn’t say for certain, but I wouldn’t think so. They’d take all their livestock with them. No doubt the folks who once lived here had ponies because it wouldn’t be practicable to use the sort of mechanical transport that was available at the time, even if they could afford it.’

‘Hm,’ murmured Biggles. ‘We seem to be learning quite a lot just sitting here. It’s something to know the enemy needs transport, so they’ve brought in a horse — or a pony. On a place this size that would hardly be to ride on themselves. It must be to carry something. But what? I give it up. The rain has stopped, so let’s take a stroll along the beach. We may learn something else. Someone had better stay on guard. Bertie, you take a turn. Before we start you might slip up to the ridge to see if there’s any sign of life.’

Bertie, who had been washing in a pool between the rocks, dried his hands and face and polished his eyeglass. ‘Fair enough.’

He took the binoculars. In a few minutes he was back. ‘Not a bally thing in sight,’ he reported.

‘What about that horse?’

‘There’s no horse near the castle now.’

‘Maybe now the weather’s cleared it’s been put out of sight,’ conjectured Biggles. ‘Anyone feel like coming to the beach with me?’

Rod and Ginger said they’d go.

‘Keep your eyes open while we’re away,’ Biggles told Bertie. ‘We shan’t be long. Have a look round from the ridge from time to time. If you see anyone about give us a whistle.’

‘I’ll do that.’

‘And don’t leave the camp.’

‘Not me, old boy, not me,’ promised Bertie.

CHAPTER 5

VISITORS, WELCOME AND UNWELCOME

LEFT alone, Bertie did not sit down and gaze at the sea. Had any of his friends been watching, they might have wondered what he intended to do that caused him to move in such a purposeful manner.

First he found and uncovered the haversack which Rod had said contained his spare fishing-tackle. This, it will be remembered, had been deposited with some other things in a corner of the living-room. Examining the contents, a smile of satisfaction crossed his face when he produced what he had expected to find. A spare spool of fishing-line. Not the oiled silk line which is actually used for casting, but the less expensive braided line, known as 'backing', which gives the line extra length, fills the reel and is put on next to the spindle.

With this in his hand he went to the rear of the house and the rubbish dump. There, after a little searching he found what he was looking for, a small but heavy piece of old metal a few inches long and not quite so wide. This evidently suited his purpose, for he took it to a small heap of bracken which he kicked aside to expose a rather horrible mess consisting of the heads and entrails of the fish he had cleaned overnight. With a short piece of the line he tied the largest head securely to the piece of metal. Having tied the full length of line on to this, he was ready for action.

With the bait dangling he went down to where some rocks overhung the sea, and choosing a place where the water appeared to be deep, threw out the lure and allowed it to sink to the bottom. He then tied the other end of the line round a rock and the operation was complete. It had taken only about five minutes.

It would not have required the services of a detective to work out the object of this performance. He was trying, more in hope than confidence, to capture a lobster. He did not seriously want a lobster. Merely from what he would have called a 'whimsy' he thought it would be amusing to see the faces of the others, when they returned, to find he had managed to catch a lobster. A little fishing could do no harm, and it would, he thought, relieve the tedium of what looked like being a dull day.

He had of course no intention of allowing this to interfere with his duty, so he now hastened to the house for the binoculars and with these in his hand he went off up the bank to the ridge. Here, lying flat, he made a thorough scrutiny of the castle and the stretch of uninspiring landscape that separated him from it. He went over the ground, both near and far, and was neither surprised nor disappointed when he failed to see any sign of life other than an occasional herring gull drifting past. He looked for Ginger's horse, but could not see it. The glasses explored the top of the castle for smoke, but without result.

He waited. The weather had improved a little, although the best that could be said of it was, it had stopped raining; but great cloud formations were piling up, and under them the moor looked dark and dank. After waiting for a little while, becoming weary of a landscape so depressing, he returned to the harbour and his fishing.

Taking the line in his hand, he tested it for weight, and having decided there was something on the end pulled it in quickly, hand over hand. Disappointment awaited him. Clinging to the bait there was indeed a lobster, but as it was only about six inches long it fell far short of his ambition. Taking it off the bait, he threw it back into the sea and moved the line to another spot.

Again he ascended the bank and from the top resumed his task of keeping the castle and the ground under observation. He could still find nothing to give him an interest. The air was fairly clear, but there were still patches of mist hanging about. Again he waited for some time, but becoming bored with the whole business he returned to his line to see if luck had come his way. Having tested it, he pulled it in slowly and carefully. The bait broke surface, and he saw to his disgust that he had caught not a lobster but a crab. It was of fair size, but this was not what he wanted. The creature dropped off just as he lifted it clear and promptly made for the sea; but he grabbed it across the back of its shell and held it while deciding whether to keep it or throw it back.

As he stood there with the creature weaving its claws and legs at him, a voice near at hand said: 'What do you think you're doing?'

Bertie turned, and found himself facing not one man, or two, but three. One was wearing an ordinary suit, with a raincoat over his arm as if he had just stepped off a train from London. The others were different. Both were roughly but warmly clad with heavy tweed jackets over thick jerseys that came up to their throats. Both wore gum-boots with trousers tucked into the tops. They were standing on the rocks not more than ten yards away.

Trying not to show his astonishment, still holding the crab, Bertie inquired coldly: 'Were you talking to me?' Naturally, he was wondering how the men had got there without him seeing them. It seemed impossible that they had walked across the open moor.

The men moved closer. The one in the town suit answered in a hard voice: 'You heard what I said. What are you doing here?' There was no trace of a Scots accent.

Bertie frowned. 'What the deuce has that got to do with you?' he demanded curtly. 'I might ask you that question.'

'Is your name Macaster?'

'My name is no concern of yours, you impudent fellow,' retorted Bertie frostily. 'I don't like the look of you. Go away.'

One of the other men spoke, and there was no doubt about his nationality. 'He's no' a Macaster.'

'I asked you a question,' went on the first speaker, in a harsh voice. 'You haven't answered it yet.'

‘If you’re going to wait for an answer you’re likely to be here a long time. All I have to say to you is, mind your own business.’

‘So that’s how you feel. Unless you’re as daft as you look, you won’t try giving me any of your lip.’

What Bertie’s answer to this, if any, would have been, will never be known, for at this juncture the scene turned to comedy — at least as far as Bertie was concerned — when the crab took a hand. Literally. Bertie’s hand. Bertie may have forgotten what he was holding. Or in his resentment at the way he was being questioned he may have become careless. At all events, the struggling crustacean managed to get a claw round one of his fingers.

His reaction was natural and instantaneous. With a yell he swung out the arm concerned to get rid as quickly as possible of the creature that had fastened itself to the extreme end of it. In this he succeeded. The crab, suddenly subjected to centrifugal force beyond its experience, was flung off the hand. It flew through the air and, although this was purely accidental as far as Bertie was concerned, would have hit his questioner in the face had the man not ducked and taken a quick step backwards. Anyone would have done the same thing. But the rocks, wet from the recent rain and slippery with seaweed, were not the place for sudden ill-considered movements. His feet skidded, and after a vain attempt to recover his balance he sat down with a squelch in a pool of water. The crab ended its short flight in the sea.

Bertie smiled broadly. Indeed, he laughed.

The man, glaring at him, swore luridly.

Bertie spoke with studied seriousness. ‘You’ll get your backside wet if you sit there much longer,’ he advised. ‘Don’t you know better than to go near a man when he’s fishing?’ he added, quizzing the man through his monocle.

Slowly, and obviously very angry, the victim of the accident got to his feet, and tried, not very successfully, to wring the water out of the seat of his trousers. ‘So you think this is funny?’ he growled.

‘Funniest thing I ever saw in my life,’ asserted Bertie, still smiling.

‘You won’t think it’s so funny by the time I’ve finished with you.’

‘Neither will you think it’s funny when the boys in blue get here,’ said Bertie, as an idea struck him.

There was a stiffening in the attitudes of the three men.

‘What did you say?’ asked the leader, in a different tone of voice.

‘You heard me. The Navy’s likely to arrive any time now, so you’d better toddle along before they ask you what *you’re* doing here. This is private property, you know.’

‘And what’s the Navy going to do?’

Bertie’s imagination rose to the occasion. ‘It could be they’re going to use the old lighthouse, or the castle, for target practice. It wouldn’t surprise me if they established a missile base. From what little I’ve seen of it this would be just the job.’

This piece of information had the desired effect. It was followed by a

brittle silence. The three men looked at each other. Possibly because what Bertie had said was feasible, they obviously took it seriously, so seriously that for a minute they were at a loss for words. Then the leader said to his companions: 'Bah! He's lying. Forget it.' But he spoke without conviction.

Again there was a pause in the conversation, and as it persisted a distant noise came faintly through the air. It was the sound of an aircraft, and, at least to Bertie, unmistakably a helicopter.

This did not bring him relief. Not for a moment did it occur to him that it could be anyone other than Algy, returning earlier than had been expected. He wondered what the effect would be when the machine landed on the beach. It would certainly put a different complexion on the situation. For some minutes he had expected to see the others appear over the rocks, having concluded their investigation of the beach, and wondered vaguely what effect that would have. Now, hearing the aircraft, they would wait for it to land. This, to Bertie, was unfortunate, and he waited with some anxiety for the outcome of the affair.

The machine came on, heading directly for the island. A couple of minutes passed. Nobody spoke. All eyes were on the aircraft which, to Bertie's surprise, turned slightly to a course that would bring it over the harbour rather than the beach. When it had made its landfall it turned again, dropping slowly towards the beach. This brought it broadside on, and what Bertie saw shook him as much as it must have shaken those standing by him.

The 'chopper' carried military markings. There was more than that. Painted in white on a dark blue background were two large letters. They were R.N..

Bertie stared. He no more knew what the machine was doing there than did the men with him. Moreover, he was staggered by this swift fulfilment of his prophecy. He still thought the arrival of the machine was purely fortuitous, but he saw the possibilities it offered and made the most of them. As the machine sank slowly to the beach with the obvious intention of landing, he said carelessly, as if he had been waiting for this to happen: 'There you are. Don't say I didn't warn you. You'd better make yourselves scarce.'

'Was this the machine that brought you here?' asked the smart man.

'Not this one, but one very much like it,' replied Bertie casually.

'What's it going to do?'

'If you wait here, or care to walk down to the beach, perhaps the officer in charge will tell you.'

Apparently this suggestion did not appeal, for the man said to those with him: 'Come on.' They walked away, keeping to the bottom of the bank.

Bertie watched them go, well satisfied to be rescued from a predicament he did not know how to handle. That is to say, how Biggles would have handled it, or wished him to handle it. It was not the moment for violence, and he had done the best he could in the circumstances. Feeling the time had come to find out what was happening on the beach, he had started up the rocks when his

party appeared from the opposite direction. They were not alone. With them was a Fleet Air Arm lieutenant, with a Chief Petty Officer and a rating loaded with equipment.

Said Biggles as he joined Bertie: 'This is Lieutenant Martin from Invergordon. He tells me orders were received at the station, from the Admiralty, for Rod's boat to be examined, right away, to ascertain its condition.'

Then, of course, Bertie understood. Algy had got through to the Air Commodore who had wasted no time getting things moving.

Biggles went on: 'Did anything happen here while I was away? I thought I heard you cry out, but I wasn't sure. The gulls were making such an infernal din.'

'Matter of fact, old boy, I hollered because a crab tried to shake hands with me. I had visitors, but they hoofed it when the Navy waffled in. I'll tell you about that later.'

'I see,' said Biggles, looking very hard at Bertie.

'Did you find anything on the beach?' Bertie wanted to know.

'Nothing, except that Ginger was right about the horse. We found hoof marks on a patch of sand.'

While this exchange of information had been going on the sailor had been getting into a frogman's outfit.

'He's going to have a look at the damage, if any, before there's any talk of salvage operations,' Biggles told Bertie.

Standing with the lieutenant, who was the pilot of the aircraft, they watched what the Petty Officer and the man he had brought with him was clearly nothing more than elementary routine.

'How did this happen?' Lieutenant Martin asked Biggles, as the sailor disappeared under the water.

'We think we know, but we hope you'll be able to tell us for certain. Macaster happens to own the island — or at least he has a lease on it from the Government. He came over alone and went for a walk round leaving the boat moored here. When he came back he found her on the bottom, although the island is presumed to be uninhabited. We can only think she must have been scuttled.'

'But who'd do a thing like that, and why?'

'We don't know. Macaster called in the Air Police and here we are.'

'Some sort of smuggling racket?'

'Could be. I sent a man back to Scotland Yard to report what had happened, and that of course brought you into the picture. Macaster would have been in a mess without us, as must have been intended. We have a small quantity of canned stuff with us. Naturally, he'd left his stores in the boat.'

'Queer business. Are you staying here?'

'Until we get things buttoned up. Our aircraft will come back for us, but Macaster doesn't want to lose his boat. She's brand-new and all his food and

gear were in her.'

'We should be able to get some up for him.'

'They should be all right. The stuff was properly packed.'

The frogman reappeared and was helped up the rocks. 'The sea-cock's open,' he reported. 'Looks like somebody was careless or else she was deliberately scuttled.'

Biggles nodded. 'That's what we suspected. Is there any other damage?'

'None that I can find, sir. She just quietly filled and went down.'

Biggles looked at the officer. 'Would it be a difficult job to raise her?'

'Nothing to it with the proper tackle; but we haven't come equipped for that sort of job, so all I can do now is report back to base.'

'I understand that. Can you do anything about Macaster's stores?'

Lieutenant Martin looked at his watch. 'I don't see why not as long as I leave myself enough time to get home before dark.'

'Fair enough.'

The officer spoke to his men, with the result that the frogman dropped back into the water and parcels were soon being handed up.

In half an hour a stack of cases had been recovered, and the lieutenant, again looking at his watch, said that would have to do. The frogman got out of his diving gear and the naval personnel set off for the beach. Biggles went with them. On reaching the machine all that remained for him to do was to thank them for their assistance. The helicopter then took off and he returned to the harbour to find the salvaged stores being carried up to the cottage. He went straight to Bertie and said: 'Now. What happened here while I was away?'

The others stopped what they were doing to listen.

'Three unpleasant bods rolled up. Took me by surprise.'

'Took you by surprise! How could that happen?'

'I don't know, but that's how it was. One thing I am sure about, and that is they didn't come across the moor. If they had I must have seen 'em.'

'Did you keep a regular watch?'

Bertie looked pained. 'Of course I did; what do you think? I spent most of my time on my tummy at the ridge. I didn't see a movement anywhere. They must have come along over the rocks by the sea. Not knowing it was possible, I'll admit I wasn't prepared for that.'

Biggles nodded. 'I wouldn't have thought so, either. Where were you and what were you doing when they arrived?'

'I was standing here, on this rock. I'd thrown a fish head into the sea as a bait, hoping to cop a lobster. Instead I caught a crab. I was about to chuck it back when suddenly they spoke behind me.'

'Didn't you hear them coming?'

'What with the waves sloshing about and the gulls howling like scalded cats, I wouldn't expect to hear anything else.'

'What did they say?'

‘Wanted to know what I was doing.’ Bertie gave a brief account of the conversation. ‘They didn’t get much change out of me,’ he concluded.

‘Did they know we were on the beach?’

‘I don’t think so, or they wouldn’t have been so cocksure of themselves.’

‘You say there were three of them. What did they look like?’

‘One, the boss I’d say since he did the talking, was a smart alec in town clothes. Dark chap. Little black moustache. English, I’d say, from his voice. The other two were ordinary types. A bit scruffy. Nothing much about them. Scots. Only one of them spoke. He said I wasn’t Macaster, from which I gather he must have seen Rod somewhere, either here or on the mainland.’

‘Hm.’ Biggles fingered his chin. ‘I’ve had about enough of this hiding in holes and corners. Algy might get back tomorrow. Whether he comes or not, if the weather isn’t too bad we’ll try to get to the bottom of this nonsense. Actually, the weather seems to be improving. This breeze should dry the place up a bit.’

‘How do you reckon to do that?’ asked Rod.

‘By having a look inside this castle of yours, and if that fails to produce results, the lighthouse. I can’t imagine these people sleeping in the open, so they must be living in one or the other. The horse suggests the castle. We know they use it to go to the beach, and it shouldn’t take us long to find out why.’

‘That suits me,’ said Rod firmly. ‘I don’t feel like creeping about my own property as if I was a poacher. We know they’re here. They know someone is here, so why beat about the bush any longer?’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Bertie. ‘I’m with you all the way. I’m all for showing these stinkers our teeth.’

‘All right. Let’s leave it at that,’ said Biggles shortly.

‘Let’s get the rest of this stuff under cover and see what we have to put in the larder.’

‘I’d better go and pull my line in; I left it in the water,’ said Bertie. ‘Rod, I hope you don’t mind me using a bit of your spare line to try a spot of fishing?’

‘Of course not. Use anything you like.’

Bertie went down to the edge of the rocks.

The others were examining the cases when, a few minutes later, he returned with a broad smile of triumph on his face. ‘How about that?’ he inquired brightly, holding up a fair-sized lobster.

Biggles was not impressed. ‘What are you going to do with that thing?’

‘Eat it, of course. What did you think I was going to do — train it as a house pet?’

‘How are you going to kill it?’

Bertie considered a question which plainly had not occurred to him. ‘How do you kill a lobster?’

‘Shoot it,’ suggested Ginger.

‘And scatter the meat all over the place! Not likely.’

‘Then stab it to death.’

‘Where do you stab a lobster?’

‘Cut its throat.’

Bertie turned the creature over and examined the underside. ‘It doesn’t appear to have one.’

Rod chipped in. ‘I believe the usual way to kill a lobster is to throw it in a pot of boiling water.’

Bertie looked shocked. ‘You don’t mean that!’

‘Sure.’

‘But here, I say, what a ghastly thing to do.’

‘That’s why they turn red.’

‘By gosh! I’m not surprised. So would you.’

‘Where are you going to find a pot?’

Biggles cut in impatiently. ‘Oh, quit this fooling. We’re not here on a picnic, neither are we on the point of death from starvation. Chuck it back in the sea. We’ve plenty to eat now without fiddling with things like that.’

Bertie sighed. ‘How is it all my little schemes come unstuck?’ he inquired plaintively, as he flung the lobster far out into the water.

CHAPTER 6

AN OLD HIGHLAND TRICK

THE rest of the day passed quietly without any incident of note. Watch was kept from the ridge, but no one was seen. The rocks by the edge of the sea were explored for the path, assuming there was one, by which the three men who had surprised Bertie had reached the harbour unobserved. There was no path, or even a suggestion of a track, but it was confirmed that an approach from that direction, along the foot of the cliffs, was possible at low tide by anyone who was prepared to take risks. It was certainly not a way a stranger would take willingly, and this, as Bertie pointed out, suggested that at least one of the men, probably one of the Scots, was familiar with the route, and in that case the whole island.

Having satisfied themselves on this point, they did not press on to the end, seeing no purpose in it. The going was difficult and the rocks treacherous. Some had newly fallen and others looked as if it would not be long before they too crashed down. There was nothing unusual in this, of course, for it is a process which on any rocky shore subjected to gales is continuous.

There was another hazard. While for the most part the cliffs, which varied from anything between fifty to a hundred feet in height, tended to overhang, there were a few places where they receded, with the result that anyone on the actual sea-shore would be in full view of anyone on the edge of the cliff above. This meant that a person on the cliff could make things very uncomfortable for anyone below, even without exposing himself, by throwing stones or pushing loose rocks over the edge.

All this having been noted, the party returned to the harbour and spent the remaining hours of daylight discussing the situation.

The weather continued to improve, which is not to say that it was all that could be desired. The rain clouds, hounded by a stiffish westerly breeze, had passed on, leaving a broad belt of greenish-blue sky smeared with odd wisps of wind-torn mist. Visibility was now fairly good. The lower air was clear but rather chilly. However, this did not worry anyone, and when darkness closed in everyone went to bed content with the way things were going. No one had supposed that the problem with which they were faced could be solved in a few hours.

After some discussion Biggles decided that an all night guard was not necessary. There was no point in wearing themselves out until it became unavoidable. The unknown men on the island, whoever they were and whatever they might be doing, knew that someone was encamped by or near the harbour, even if they did not know the exact spot; but he did not think they would at this stage resort to open violence. After all, Biggles argued, they were dealing with civilized people, not savages. If the strangers contemplated

anything of that sort there was no reason why they should wait for nightfall, because any such action would be more easily carried out in daylight, when the natural obstacles could more easily be seen.

In the event this was a mistake; but at the time it seemed a reasonable line of argument.

It was Ginger who awoke first. Still not properly awake he had a sensation that he was choking. Was it a dream? Was he still dreaming? Then, suddenly he was wide awake, and knew that it was fact. The place was full of smoke. At first, not unnaturally, he thought it was the house that was on fire. A spark had fallen on some dry bracken? Biggles had dropped off to sleep while smoking and set fire to his bed?

Rising on an elbow, he saw at a glance that this was not so. A square of bright orange light filling the open doorway told him the truth. There was a fire, but it was outside. With a shout of alarm he sprang up and ran out. What he saw gave him the shock of his life. It looked as if the world was on fire. The sky was a lurid scarlet glow. The air was thick with smoke. Sparks were flying. From no great distance away came a harsh crackling. It was as light as day. Birds were tearing past, screaming. Rabbits and hares were leaping over the rocks. He saw one, with its fur on fire, jump into the sea.

By this time the others, aroused by his shout, were outside and could see what he could see.

‘My God! The whole island must be on fire,’ cried Biggles, coughing.

‘The heather certainly is,’ replied Rod, calmly. ‘The question is, which way is the fire running? If the wind hasn’t changed it must be coming this way.’

‘It is coming this way,’ rapped out Biggles. ‘Look at the sparks coming over us. How far away is the fire? How long have we got, that’s the point?’

‘I’ll find out.’ Ginger raced up the slope, and from the ridge saw such a sight as he had never seen before. But then, of course, he had never seen a runaway heather fire, fanned by a breeze. Those who have, and there are many in Scotland, will know that it presents a spectacle not easily forgotten, or to exaggerate.

What Ginger saw was a wall of leaping flames ten feet high on a front nearly a quarter of a mile wide. It was less than a hundred yards from him and roaring straight towards the whole area of the harbour. Flaming debris was being flung high and already he could feel the heat on his face. He tore back.

‘Quick!’ he panted. ‘It’s coming straight towards us. Nothing can stop it.’

‘Everyone grab as much as he can carry and make for the beach,’ ordered Biggles tersely. ‘That’s the only way we can go.’

‘We’ve only got five minutes at the outside,’ warned Ginger, snatching up the binoculars, the small-kit haversacks and the primus.

‘The fire will have to stop when it reaches the rocks,’ said Bertie.

‘By that time we shall have been suffocated by smoke,’ snapped Biggles.

They seized as much stuff as they could carry and there was a rush for the

beach. Only Bertie tarried for a few moments to throw the remainder of Rod's food parcels down on to the rocks, where there was no heather to burn. Then he, too, hurried on after the rest.

There was no more talking, for there was ample evidence that the peril was imminent. By the time the beach was reached flames could be seen shooting up from behind the ridge. Everyone was coughing, but on the flat shingle they could now run; and run they did, for it was not only heat that swept down the bank in front of the fire, although that was scorching. It was the acrid, pungent smoke, which brought tears to their eyes and almost blinded them. It bit into their lungs and kept them coughing without respite.

The retreat ended in a desperate rush to get past the danger point by outflanking the end of the fire, the limit of which could be seen on the ridge. Where there was heather, bracken, or anything else that would burn, the fire came on down the bank; but here the herbage grew in tufts and clumps, which slowed it down as it had to jump from one to the other; and, of course, it had to end when it came to the beach, where there was nothing except stones and sand, and then the sea.

They went on to the far end of the beach where, finding they were out of the smoke, they dropped their luggage and sank down to get some fresh air into their lungs and strike out smouldering patches on their clothes where sparks had fallen on them.

'Phew! That was a close squeak,' panted Biggles, wiping his eyes with his handkerchief. 'How the devil did that happen?'

'It didn't happen,' asserted Rod.

'What do you mean?'

'Someone put fire to the heather.'

Biggles blinked. 'You really think that?'

'I know it. That fire couldn't have started any other way,' Rod smiled wanly. 'It's an old Highland trick, or it used to be, years ago. It was simple and it worked. One clan would get on the windward side of people it didn't like and set fire to the heather. The wind did the rest. Everything had to go, horses, cattle, houses, and anyone who couldn't get out of the way in time.'

'What charming people they must have been.'

'No worse than those who blast the landscape with bombs.'

'Let's not argue about that. Come to think of it I've heard of heather being burnt deliberately.'

'That's for a different reason. You burn off old stick heather, which is useless to man or beast, to provide grazing. It has to be done by people who know the job. You're not allowed to burn in summer, anyhow; it's too dangerous. Once such a fire gets out of hand nothing can stop it until it comes to a river or a road — or in our case, a beach and the sea. If the peat under the heather catches fire it can burn until heavy rain or snow puts it out. After the recent rain we've had here the peat must be wet, so we needn't worry about that. There goes our snug little cottage.'

Looking along the beach through the already thinning smoke, they saw the house that had sheltered them go up in flames.

‘So you believe this was done deliberately?’ said Biggles, looking at Rod.

‘It couldn’t have happened any other way. In high summer, when the heather is bone dry and the peat like tinder, the sun shining through a piece of glass has been known to spark off a fire. I don’t notice any sunshine here to speak of. The fire started after dark, so that settles any argument about it being accidental. The heather here, being damp, would need a fire to get it going, anyway, although once started it wouldn’t matter if it was wet.’

‘So the dirty dogs tried to burn us out,’ muttered Bertie, cleaning his eyeglass.

‘They seem to have done that,’ Biggles pointed out bitterly.

Rod went on. ‘I should have considered the possibility, but I didn’t think they’d go as far as that. It looks as if the worst is over. When it gets light we’ll go back to see what’s happened.’

They sat on convenient rocks to wait and recover from the shock the fire had given them. After a while Biggles said: ‘There is this about it. The people here have made it clear that they’re prepared to go to any lengths to make life impossible for anyone else.’

‘Anything short of murder,’ murmured Ginger.

‘After what’s happened tonight I wouldn’t put that past them,’ returned Biggles. ‘Why, they might have done that already. You realize that a few more minutes before discovering the fire and we might have been burnt to death in our beds, or suffocated by smoke. Smoke can kill as well as fire.’

‘They couldn’t have known what they were doing when they set fire to the heather.’

‘They knew all right. Certainly those two Scots must have known what was likely to happen. You don’t live all your life in the Highlands without learning something about heather fires.’ Biggles went on: ‘There’s another point that worries me. Had our aircraft been standing on the beach, with those sparks flying it might have gone up in flames before we could get it away. Apart from the position it would have left us in, there would have been a nice row about that. To say it had been burnt by enemy action, without a hope of proving it, would have been a waste of time.’

‘Well, you needn’t worry about your plane being burnt now,’ said Rod cheerfully. ‘The risk of that happening has gone. The heather’s gone, and it’ll be years before it’s long enough to burn again. I’m not sorry to see that old heather go. It was useless. Next spring there’ll be grazing for sheep on the land where it occupied.’

‘You may be here to see it, but I hope we shan’t,’ replied Biggles. ‘A little of this sample of country life goes a long way with me.’

Time wore on. Grey light began to spread from the east. It revealed that except for a faint wreath of smoke here and there the fire had burnt itself out.

‘Let’s have a look at the damage,’ said Biggles, rising. ‘Before we go back

to the house, if there's anything left of it except the walls, which I doubt, we might as well have a look at the landscape from up top to see if anyone's about.'

They made their way up a slope which the previous day had been green, but was now as black as a coal face. From the top the view was as might have been expected, but even so it gave Ginger cause to stare. The places where the fire had been started, and there must have been several of these for the blackened area began on a wide front, were plain to see. Behind, in the direction of the higher ground, the island still wore its sombre green cloak of heather, but in front of the broad track of the fire was a carbonized expanse on which nothing remained except a few outcrops of rock.

'The scenery wasn't exactly thrilling before, but now it would be hard to find a word for it,' remarked Biggles, succinctly. 'What a mess. I can't see anyone about, so let's go on to the harbour. Keep below the ridge. The chances are that someone will be watching for signs of us.'

They found it easier to walk back along the beach, now littered with charred debris that had been carried forward by the wind. When the objective was reached no one could have been surprised by what he saw. The rocks were still there, of course, exactly as they had been, and the boxes that Bertie had thrown out were still lying where they had fallen. There was nothing else. The slope was black. Of the little house, all that remained was an empty shell, the four stone walls.

'Looks as if we shall have to find fresh accommodation,' observed Biggles. 'With nothing here to watch, we're not tied to this particular spot.'

'There are some more houses from which to choose,' advised Rod.

'They're all pretty much alike, of course.'

'With plenty of nice long heather round them to burn, no doubt,'

'I'm afraid so.'

'Would they be in view of the castle?'

'More or less.'

'Then that's no use. The enemy would be able to watch our every movement. After last night I feel more inclined to park myself where there's nothing left to burn.'

'You mean — on these bare rocks?' queried Bertie, looking startled.

'No, I didn't exactly mean that. We shall have to find cover of some sort in case the weather turns nasty again. I noticed some caves along the foot of the cliff which didn't appear to be submerged even at high water. One of those might serve as a temporary measure, anyway, to store our kit and what food we have left. In a cave we could light a fire without it being seen.'

'I'm nothing for caves,' declared Bertie. 'My people packed up cave-dwelling about two thousand years ago and I don't feel like starting that all over again. Couldn't this bonfire game be played two ways?'

'How do you mean?'

'The stinkers smoked us out. Why shouldn't we give them a taste of their

own medicine?’

‘For one very good reason. The wind’s in the wrong direction.’

‘There’s another reason,’ put in Rod. ‘There’s nothing round the castle to burn, if that’s what you had in mind. It’s only grass nibbled flat by rabbits and a few green rushes which you couldn’t burn if you tried.’

Bertie shook his head sadly. ‘It’s no use. My ideas never click.’

‘What’s the alternative to this cave notion?’ asked Rod.

‘As far as I can see there’s only one, and that’s to march straight to the castle and have a show-down. I’m assuming these fire-raisers live in the castle.’

‘Okay,’ returned Rod, crisply. ‘Let’s do that.’

‘They’d see us as soon as we started and make preparations.’

‘So what? I’m the boss of my own property.’

‘I’m not so sure that you are at the moment. I don’t think it would be wise to stick our necks out until Algy gets back. If we did, he, not knowing what’s happened, might step straight into trouble. A better scheme might be to walk along the base of the cliff at low tide and come on the castle from behind. They won’t be expecting us to arrive from that direction. From what we’ve seen it should be possible.’

‘That suits me,’ said Rod.

‘Has anyone else any ideas?’ inquired Biggles, looking around.

Ginger had one. ‘Instead of tackling this job in broad daylight, why not get as far as we can along the foot of the cliffs and storm the castle after dark?’

Biggles considered the proposition. ‘There are arguments against it,’ he pointed out. ‘We’d be on enemy ground, which means they’d know their way about while we would not. Moreover, if we had to retreat we’d look silly if we found we’d been cut off by the tide. Still, we might explore the ground. But the first thing is to find a place to store our gear. Then we’ll have something to eat. I see no reason why, with smoke still hanging about, we shouldn’t light a fire. There should be some driftwood on the high water mark. We mustn’t be caught napping again, though. Bertie, you keep watch along the cliff track. Ginger, you keep an eye on things from the ridge.’

After they had gone Biggles looked at Rod. ‘You’re probably thinking the way I’m handling this business is a bit lily-fingered, but that’s the way we have to work over here. The policy is to avoid violence for as long as possible, which means we can’t take the law into our own hands just when we feel like it.’

Rod shrugged. ‘It’s your country, pal.’

CHAPTER 7

THE CASTLE

IT did not take Biggles and Rod long to find a cave, more correctly a shallow recess in the face of the cliff, which would be suitable for the temporary storage of their belongings. It was not large enough or deep enough to provide the party with accommodation, but it was dry, being above the high water mark, and would therefore serve their purpose for the time being. Anyhow it would do, Biggles declared, until they found somewhere better.

As they returned to the harbour, where the stores had been left, he also said it would be a good thing to see exactly what they had in the way of food, to get an idea of how long they could hold out if no more was forthcoming.

A check revealed two tins of biscuits, some sugar, tea, condensed milk and a variety of cans containing preserved fruits and meats of one sort or another. This it was thought should be sufficient to last them for three days if they were careful. As Algy would certainly be back by that time, they had nothing to worry about.

Bertie and Ginger were called in. Neither had anything to report, so without delay the stores were moved the short distance to their new base. This done they all returned to the harbour while waiting for the tide to ebb. A tang of burnt heather still hung in the air. Biggles kept his eyes on the sky over the sea.

‘I’m hoping to see Algy,’ he explained.

‘What difference will it make if he comes?’ asked Rod.

‘A lot. I don’t want him to land and finding no one on the beach come to look for us, leaving the machine unattended. I’m anxious to have his news, anyway. I’m considering sending him back to the Air Commodore to report on what has happened here since he left, and ask for his instructions.’ Biggles smiled. ‘I suppose, Rod, that’s what you’d call “passing the buck”.’

‘By shifting the responsibility to him?’

‘Exactly. That’s an old army racket.’

‘Not only the army,’ murmured Rod, knowingly.

Biggles became serious. ‘A feeling is growing on me that if we start something here it’ll end in open war. We’ve got to watch our step. Remember, so far we haven’t a clue as to what’s going on. It may be something comparatively trivial, such as common poaching. Having noticed one or two seals about, I’ve even considered the possibility of fur poaching, which is illegal. I just don’t know, and I’d like to be sure of my ground before we start getting really tough.’

Bertie spoke. ‘There is this about it, old boy. Just as we don’t know what these blighters are doing here, they don’t know why we’re here. I mean to say, while they probably know about Rod being here to take up his tenancy of the

island, they've no reason to suppose he's called in the police.'

'True enough,' agreed Biggles. 'Obviously they don't want Rod here. The big question is why? It seems pretty certain they're not making this a temporary abode, or they wouldn't go to so much trouble to keep it to themselves. At the moment, as far as we can judge, they couldn't get away if they wanted to leave, although there's reason to believe that a boat and an aircraft come here from time to time.'

'And they use a horse,' reminded Ginger.

'All of which suggests to me that there's real money in whatever the racket is,' said Rod, shrewdly.

Biggles agreed. He got up. 'The tide seems to be nearly at full ebb so we might as well try something.'

'A walk along the foot of the cliff as far as we can get?'

'That was what we decided. We can't all go. Someone will have to stay here to put Algy wise in case he turns up, although it may still be a bit early for that. Ginger, you'll stay. Find a place from which you can watch the beach, but keep under cover as much as you can. If Algy comes tell him what goes on. Don't leave the machine. That's our lifeline. If we lost that we *should* be up the creek without a paddle. The enemy could hardly fail to hear it, or see it arrive, and it's likely their curiosity would bring them along — or one of them — to find out what it's doing here. That must be of vital importance to them now they've been given the idea that the Navy is interested in the place.'

'Good enough. Are you likely to be away long?' asked Ginger.

'It's hard to say. It depends on how things go. With luck we may be able to do a little scouting round the castle, if we can get up to it. We're more likely to need the binoculars than you are, so we'll take them.'

Nothing more was said. Ginger walked off in the direction of the beach.

Biggles, with Rod, and Bertie with the glasses slung over his shoulder, moved in the opposite direction.

Noticing Rod was carrying his twelve-bore, Biggles asked: 'Are you going to take that?'

'I might as well. It won't be in the way. It's my favourite gun and I'd be sorry if anything happened to it.'

Biggles did not pursue the matter.

The margin of rocks and boulders that lay between the foot of the cliff and the sea was not very wide. It was the usual picture of any similar coastline: rocks of all shapes and sizes, festooned with seaweed and encrusted with limpets, barnacles and winkles, with pools of water, now stagnant, left by the receding tide, at frequent intervals. A way to get round or over these obstacles had constantly to be sought, and more than once, having come to an impasse, they had to retrace their steps to look for another passage. It was also necessary to keep an eye on the rim of the cliff above. Although these conditions had been expected, they meant that progress was slow.

It must have been getting on for an hour later when Biggles stopped, looking at certain marks on the face of the cliff that spoke for themselves, in particular a short area, low down, of wet seaweed. 'I don't care much for this,' he remarked, frowning. 'You realize we couldn't get along here at high water. The tide's on the turn. One of the first things a sensible soldier learns is always to keep an eye on his line of retreat. If we were cut off at a place where the cliff happens to be sheer things would look grim.'

'Quite right; but we can't have much farther to go. We must be getting close to the castle and that's where I'd expect to find a way up,' answered Rod. 'Any time now we should come to a place where the cliff breaks down to offer a way to the top. I'm all for going on.'

Biggles turned and looked back along the way they had come. Already the waves were being driven in with more force, as could be judged by the spray and the noise they were making. Against his better judgement he said: 'Have it your way. Let's go on, as long as you realize we're gambling on finding a way up.'

Rod did not answer. They went on.

They had not gone far when it seemed that his optimism was justified. A great landslide had torn a gap in the cliff and the fallen debris lay in a long slope offering a rough passage to the top.

Biggles admitted his relief. 'So this is it,' he said. 'We can't go back. It's too late, and I'm not risking being caught half-way. That leaves us with two courses open. We can either wait here for the next low tide, or we can climb to the top to see where we are; which would mean, if we wanted to go back to the beach, we should have to walk in full view of anyone at the castle.'

'And why not?' demanded Rod, in a hard voice. 'Spare my days! It's come to a nice thing if I can't walk across my own property in what is considered to be a civilized country. I'm going up.'

'Okay, if that's how you feel. It's up we go.'

Bertie smiled. 'Jolly good! Now we may have some fun instead of prancing about on these dirty rocks like a lot of bally mountain goats.'

Biggles did not answer. They started the rather precarious climb up the chaos of loose rocks. It was a long, arduous pull to the top, starting from sea level to what was the highest, or nearly the highest, part of the island. Fortunately the landslide was an old one, so the rocks had had time to settle down, or it could have been more dangerous than it turned out to be. Great care had to be taken, nevertheless, if a nasty accident was to be avoided.

Rod was the first to reach the top. He peeped over, but bobbed down again instantly.

'What's the trouble?' asked Biggles.

'No trouble. But we're right against the castle. Not more than about fifty yards.'

'That's good news,' said Bertie. 'It'll save our shoe leather getting to it.'

'What's more important, the shorter the distance the less the chance of our

being seen getting to it,' remarked Biggles. 'That's if we decide to pay our friends a visit. Being so close, I suppose we might as well go on and settle the business one way or the other. We'd be seen going back across the open to the beach, anyhow, and I don't feel inclined to spend the rest of the day waiting for the tide.'

'That's more like it,' declared Rod. 'If they want to play tough they'll find two can play the same game.'

'Just as a matter of interest, what are you going to say if you find 'em in the castle?'

'I shall ask them what they think they're doing in my house, and kick 'em out. Tell 'em if they're not off my property in twenty-four hours I'll have the law on them.'

'Reckoning the law is a long way from here, they're not likely to take much notice of that.'

'They'll get a shock when they find it isn't as far away as they imagine. I shall rely on you to support me.'

'You seem to have forgotten one thing.'

'What's that?'

'I, as a police officer, might not be content merely to tell them to take themselves off. I want to know what they're doing. It could be anything. They might be engaged in some serious racket, law breaking in a big way. Judging from how they've behaved, I suspect that's the English of it.'

'Okay. Let's go and find out.' Rod got up and started walking briskly towards the castle. He made no attempt to conceal himself.

The others followed.

The castle, seen from a short distance away, was not as impressive as it had appeared on the skyline from the ridge above the harbour. It was a massive rectangular stone pile covering a fair amount of ground, but being only two storeys high it gave the impression of being squat. It would have looked more so had it not been for a castellated surround to what was evidently a flat roof and a turret at each of the four corners. No attempt had been made at decoration, the emphasis being on strength rather than appearance. As the building had been designed and erected at a time when local wars were the rule and not the exception, when a chieftain never knew from one day to the next when an attack might be launched on his stronghold, defence and the ability to withstand a siege were the only things that mattered.

The windows, at exact intervals, were tall but narrow, not much more than slits in the masonry, with the lower line just out of reach of a man standing outside. At one time, access to the castle would have been more difficult, for running flush with the walls was a depression, a trench, which had obviously been a moat. It was now more or less dry, the water it had once contained having given way to reeds.

To the rear of the main structure, at an angle to their line of approach, some outbuildings formed a sort of annexe. They were now mostly in ruins, either

as a result of not being so well built, or possibly as a result of an enemy attack. There was not a soul in sight, and as far as sounds were concerned the place was as silent as a mortuary. No smoke arose above the roof. There were no actual chimneys in the modern manner.

‘How many doors are there to this noble mansion?’ Biggles asked Rod, with mild sarcasm.

‘I could only find one. The main entrance. It’s round at the front. There used to be a small door at the back, but it appears to have been blocked up. I can’t imagine why, but no doubt there was a reason when it was done.’

Biggles stopped, sniffing. ‘I can smell peat smoke,’ he said. There must be a fire not far away.’

‘I guess it must be coming from the area that was burnt last night,’ said Rod.

‘I wouldn’t call that a very good guess. We’re some way from the nearest point of the fire and the wind’s in the wrong direction. Strange things are happening here, but I’m not prepared to believe that smoke can travel against the wind.’

They were now passing the outbuildings, and as Biggles finished speaking, from somewhere within the open area between them there came the clink of metal. He looked at Rod. ‘Nor does metal move about without assistance,’ he added softly. ‘Let’s have a look.’

There was still no sign of anyone as they advanced to a gap between the buildings, long the prey of moss and lichen. Passing through, the explanation of the sound they had heard was instantly apparent. Grazing on the coarse grass that covered the ground inside the enclosure was a shaggy pony, tethered, to prevent it from straying, by a length of rope fastened to a rusty iron ring let into an ancient trough.

‘Ginger’s nag,’ murmured Biggles. He walked on to an open doorway close at hand and looked inside. ‘And here’s its saddle,’ he observed, in a curious voice.

Rod looked in. ‘A pack-saddle, eh! What do you make of that?’

‘It’s as we thought,’ replied Biggles. ‘That animal is used to take something to, or fetch something from, the beach. We know it has been there since we came here because we saw its hoof marks in the sand. I wouldn’t try to guess the nature of the load it has to carry, but one thing’s pretty obvious. It’s heavy, too heavy for a man to carry across the moor without putting a crick in his back.’

Rod’s face creased in an expression of bewilderment. ‘What the devil could it be? What could there possibly be here that would need a horse to carry it? All I can see are rocks, stones and peat, and there’s no need to haul any of them to the mainland. There’s plenty of that sort of thing there already.’

Bertie spoke. ‘You said something about deer on the island, Rod. What about venison?’

Rod shook his head. 'No, that isn't it. It wouldn't be worth while. There are only a few deer, anyhow. You could probably shoot the lot in a week. I'll admit that an odd boat might put in once in a while, if it was thought there was nobody here, to do a spot of stalking with something to take home to the larder at the end of it. But as a business for profit, no.'

'It's a fascinating question,' resumed Biggles. 'I'm as interested as you to know the answer. Let's have a look round the inside of the house. We may find a clue to the answer there. I suppose we can get in?'

'The door was open when I came here, as I told you,' said Rod.

'Did you find a key inside?'

'No. It's doubtful if one exists. If there is one nobody knows what has become of it. That question arose when my grandfather took over the place. When I wrote to the Commissioners for Crown Lands saying I was coming over, I asked about the key to the castle. They said they had no knowledge of one. I didn't worry about it because should I decide to settle here it would be a simple matter to fit a new lock. The contractors I'd have to call in to restore the place would be able to do that.'

They walked on, and presently, under Rod's guidance they arrived at the main entrance — indeed, the only entrance. They found the door shut. It was not very big, arched at the top in the manner of many church doors and just as heavily built. In fact, it was a solid piece of oak, black with age, braced from top to bottom with bars of timber well studded with iron knobs. But when Biggles turned the big iron ring that formed the handle the door swung open easily. He seemed to think too easily, for the first thing he did when he stepped inside was have a close look at the wide, wrought iron hinges.

'After all these years you'd think a door like this, exposed to the weather, would creak a bit,' he remarked quietly. 'But no. Not a squeak. Now I see why.'

'Why?'

'These hinges have been oiled; not yesterday, perhaps, nor this year; but within recent times someone has given them a brush of oil. Very considerate, to make things easy for visitors. I think you may take it, Rod, that your lodgers haven't got a key either, or they would have used it to keep the door locked — and so keep us out. This door was built to stand up to battle-axes, and it would need several sticks of dynamite to break it open.'

They all walked in, to find themselves in a small square entrance hall with an arched exit on the far side. There was no door. Going on they found themselves in what must have been the main room of the original occupants. It was of considerable size with a vaulted roof. Light forced its way in through windows thick with dirt and cobwebs. There was not a stick of furniture of any sort, either on the stone-paved floor or on the walls. There was a huge fireplace, itself the size of a small room. It was empty. There was no grate, no ashes.

'Quite a place you've got here, Rod,' remarked Biggles whimsically. Then,

raising his voice he called: 'Anyone at home?'

The words reverberated with the hollow echo one usually gets in a large empty room.

There was no answer.

Biggles looked at the others and smiled. 'Apparently we're not welcome.'

'You think there's somebody here?' questioned Rod.

'I'd bet on it.'

'Why?'

'Frankly, I don't know. It's just a feeling I have. Call it instinct, intuition, anything you like.'

'You'll remember me telling you that's exactly how I felt about it?'

Biggles nodded. 'I know what you mean. You'd expect to find a place like this, empty for so long, chill and damp, but it doesn't strike me that way at all. It may be my imagination, but every now and then I get a whiff of burning peat. Very queer.'

'Ghosts don't light fires; they've no need to,' chuckled Bertie.

'If we had only ghosts to deal with our job here would be simple,' answered Biggles. 'Take it from me, we're up against something rather more solid.'

He began a systematic study of the floor.

After watching him for a few minutes Rod said: 'Are you looking for something?'

'Yes.'

'What?'

'Nothing in particular. Anything that might prove this place is occupied, or has been, recently.'

'Such as?'

'Cigarette ends, used match sticks, ashes of pipe tobacco — anything. There appears to be nothing.'

'Surely that suggests there's nobody here?' queried Bertie, polishing his monocle thoughtfully.

'It could also mean that someone, expecting a visit from us, has had a good clean up, in the hope we'll assume there's nobody here and go away. I didn't really expect to find anything. They'd be fools to leave things lying about. Even one small object can say a lot.'

'If they're here they must have heard us,' averred Rod.

'Of course they have,' rejoined Biggles. 'To thoroughly explore a place like this without being heard by someone else in the building would be impossible. I could see no reason why we should attempt it. We have every right to be here. They're the intruders.'

'Here — here,' said Bertie. 'Them's my sentiments, absolutely.'

Biggles, whose eyes had never stopped scanning the floor, suddenly stooped and with some difficulty picked up a tiny object. He laid it on the palm of his left hand and held it out for the others to see. It was a grain of

corn.

‘I see nothing to get excited about in that,’ said Rod.

‘You see what it is?’

‘Of course; a grain of oats.’

‘I haven’t noticed any oats flourishing on the island.’

The pony is probably given a feed of oats from time to time.’

‘So it might be. The poor little beast looked as though it could do with a feed. But can you see the people here hauling oats from the mainland to feed a pony? I can’t.’ Biggles went on, speaking slowly and distinctly. ‘But that’s beside the point. This isn’t an oat. It’s a grain of barley.’

‘What difference does that make?’

‘A lot. If grain was brought here to feed the pony it would be oats, not barley. Again, oats may have been grown here at one time, but I doubt if anyone would try to raise a crop of barley when oats would suit them better. As far as I know, you can’t produce oatmeal from barley.’

‘So what? I don’t see what you’re driving at.’

‘Neither do I, if it comes to that. All I know is, this barleycorn has no more reasonable right to be here than a banana. It doesn’t belong, so I’m bound to wonder how it got here, who brought it, and why. If I had to make a guess I’d say it dropped off somebody’s clothes, perhaps out of the turnup of a pair of trousers, or possibly a gum-boot. But never mind how it got into this room. What I’d like to know is why barley was brought to Tola. Anyway, it’s given us something to think about. Let’s move on.’

CHAPTER 8

TRAPPED

As they walked on to the far end of this dismal chamber, their footsteps making a hollow sound on the stone floor, Rod said: 'There's no other room anything like this size. I figure it must take up at least half of the ground floor. The kitchen's a fair size, as I suppose it had to be to cook for the number of people, servants, and guards who would have to be quartered in the castle to defend it against sudden attack; but most of the rooms are on the small side, particularly upstairs. They didn't believe in wasting space on sleeping quarters.'

The exit from the great hall was by another, rather small, arched opening. There was no door, and there were no signs that there ever had been one. It opened into a narrow corridor with one or two small rooms on each side. Everything was bare stone, plain and cheerless.

'Why did they have to make this corridor so narrow?' asked Bertie, as they walked on, of necessity having to fall into single file.

'I imagine that was all part of the defence system,' answered Rod. 'If an enemy got inside he'd have to fight for every inch of ground. Utility came first, comfort second. It's the same with the stairway to the upper floor. Here it is,' he went on, as they came to a narrow flight of stone steps spiralling upwards. There was no handrail, so a false step would mean a fall to the stone floor below. 'Notice which way the spiral winds,' continued Rod. 'Always from right to left. Which means that a man defending the steps would have his right arm, his sword arm, free, while a fellow trying to get up would be knocking his elbow and banging his weapon against the wall.'

'You seem to have made a study of these things,' bantered Biggles.

'I've taken an interest since I became the owner of a medieval castle. Wouldn't you?'

'I'm not likely to become the owner of a castle, medieval or modern,' answered Biggles lightly. 'As we're here we might as well have a look round upstairs.'

'Just as you like, but you won't find anything there. I looked the last time I was here.'

'I'd like to check how much of the island can be seen from the roof. Just a minute, though. What's this?' Biggles was looking at a small door under the stairway. It was of old oak, reinforced with horizontal bands of iron. 'That would take a bit of breaking down,' he observed. 'What's the other side?'

'I've no idea,' replied Rod.

'Couldn't you get in?'

'No. It's locked — or it was when I came here. There's no key. I imagine it leads to the cellars where food could be stored against a siege. Some such

storage place would be necessary. Or it might be the way to the dungeons, for prisoners. But I'm only guessing.'

Stooping a little, Biggles examined the door, particularly the keyhole. 'I'll tell you something,' he said in a curious voice. 'The door's old, no doubt about that, but there's nothing ancient about the lock. It's a modern double mortice, so it must have been put in recently. Who'd do that, and why?'

'Search me. It was probably done because the original key was lost.'

'That doesn't answer my question. Who'd care whether this door was locked or not? To leave the front door unlocked and then go to the trouble of fitting a new lock here doesn't make much sense to me.'

'There must have been a reason.'

'Obviously. I'd like to know what it was. We can't pretend to have searched the castle while there's a room we haven't seen.'

'The Crown Commissioners may know something about it. They may have used the place to store furniture or something.'

'That could be the answer; but if so I'd have expected them to tell you about it.'

'It must have been overlooked. These Government departments are always changing their staffs and a new man might know nothing about it. I got the impression that nobody knew anything about the castle, and couldn't have cared less.'

Biggles shrugged. 'Well, we can't get in so let's move on.'

'There's the water supply.' Rod pointed to a wooden structure, in a bad state of repair, over a trapdoor fitted with iron rings. 'It's a well,' he continued. 'I had a look at it. Not a well in the true sense of the word, I think, but a big hole cut in the rock to form a reservoir for rain-water which must come from the roof. It was raining when I was here before and I could hear the water trickling in. The contraption over the top is, or was before it fell to pieces, a windlass for drawing the water. In the old days they'd need an inside water supply. Do you want to have a look at it?'

'I'll take your word for it. If the tank's full of water there isn't likely to be anything else. What's farther on?'

'Only the kitchen. We can have a look at that presently. Let's take a turn upstairs.'

'As you say.'

Near the foot of the stone steps Biggles stooped to pick up a small object.

'Found something?' queried Bertie.

'Yes.'

'Interesting?'

'It might be.' Biggles held out a hand. On the palm lay another grain of barley. 'I shan't be happy until I know what barley is doing in a place where there appears to be no need for it,' he said, tossing the grain aside. 'Let's go up.'

They took the winding stairs to the next floor and began a systematic

search of the rooms. There were several. They were all small, and empty. Just stone floors and walls. Not a single object of the slightest interest was found.

‘They had plenty of stone, but timber must always have been in short supply,’ remarked Rod. ‘If they ever had any on the island it would soon be used up.’

A short flight of steps gave access to the roof. At one time there had been a wooden covering, against the weather, at the top of the steps, but most of it had rotted away. From the parapet the views were impressive but unattractive. Behind lay the sea, grey and monotonous, with one or two smudges on the horizon to mark the position of smaller outlying islands. In front was the bleak, colourless, rolling moorland that covered most of the island. The area blackened by the fire showed up conspicuously.

Beyond it a narrow strip of the beach could just be seen. There was no sign of Ginger, or an aircraft.

‘Apparently Algy hasn’t got back yet,’ observed Biggles, turning half right to look at the abandoned lighthouse, not far away, standing, forlorn and desolate, near the edge of the cliff, staring eternally at the empty sea. Near it half a dozen deer were grazing. These, and the ever-present sea-birds, were the only living creatures in sight.

Biggles said: ‘You know, it’s a funny thing, but I can’t get this smell of burning peat out of my nostrils. I could swear I can smell peat, but I’ve reached the stage when I don’t really know whether it’s real or imagination.’

‘I fancy I get a whiff of it sometimes,’ informed Bertie.

After gazing at the panorama for a few minutes longer, Biggles went on: ‘I don’t think we need waste any more time here. Let’s go back downstairs.’

Reaching the bottom he nodded along the corridor. ‘You say there’s only the kitchen there?’

‘That’s right.’

‘We might as well have a look at it now we’re here. It might be a good thing to get to know our way about the place. It’s going to cost you a tidy penny, Rod, to make it fit for civilized people to live in.’

‘I might as well spend my money that way as any other. I shall at least have something to show for it. People who don’t like this sort of life might die of boredom, but that’s less painful than being knocked flat on your face by a lunatic in an automobile. At least we have no traffic problems.’

‘By thunder! I’ll give you that,’ acknowledged Biggles, grinning.

A little farther on they came to a door, the latch, a stout bar of oak, operated by an old-fashioned bobbin and cord. Rod lifted the latch from its socket and they went in.

‘Phew! What a fug-hole,’ muttered Bertie. ‘When this place was in use it must have stunk like the fo’c’sle of a Spanish onion boat.’

Actually, the kitchen was a room of fair size, as two high, narrow, unglazed windows enabled them to observe. Its purpose was apparent. The middle of one wall was occupied by a huge open fire-place, from which

projected the arm of a heavy iron spit. Suspended by chains hung hooks of various sizes, black with the greasy soot of many years of use. A vast iron cauldron lay on its side. A rough-hewn stone trough, with the outlet running through a hole in the wall, evidently served as a sink. There were also sundry hooks on the walls. Bertie hung the binoculars on one of them. All in all it was a dull, gloomy sort of place.

Into one of the walls ran a recess, perhaps a yard square and four feet high, which looked as if it had been a store cupboard. The bottom was flush with the floor and littered with a layer of dry sticks which in some remote age may have been gathered for starting the fire. There was something else, not so easily explained.

‘I wonder what was the purpose of this comical contrivance?’ said Biggles, stooping to look at it more closely.

Half-way up the recess an iron pin crossed from one side to the other, the ends fitting into sockets in the stonework. This appeared to act as a spindle for a wheel about ten inches in diameter. Except that it was heavier and made of iron, it was rather like a scooter wheel, in that it had a raised rim, as if to take a tyre. There was of course no tyre. With a little difficulty Biggles was able to turn the wheel half a revolution. ‘It’s a long time since this was used, whatever its purpose may have been,’ he observed, straightening his back. ‘Queer. It was obviously intended to wind something on, but what that was is beyond my imagination. What *do* you wind in a kitchen?’

‘Some device for turning the spit, perhaps,’ suggested Rod.

Biggles shrugged. ‘Could be. It defeats me.’

Bertie changed the subject. ‘You wouldn’t have to cut a beast into joints to roast it over *that* fire. You could cook a deer whole.’

‘No doubt that was how the meat *was* cooked,’ said Rod.

‘Saved a lot of fiddling about and washing up,’ offered Biggles.

‘Think of the mess, old boy, think of the mess,’ said Bertie, with an expression of disgust. ‘Blood and gravy all over the floor. It must have been grim.’

‘Life *was* grim when this place was built,’ Biggles reminded him cheerfully. ‘No fancy soap powders in those days, yet somehow people managed to survive.’

A slight sound behind caused him to turn sharply. ‘What was that?’

‘It was only the door swinging shut,’ Rod pointed out. ‘We left it open.’

‘I know we left it open. How could it shut itself? There’s no draught.’

Biggles went quickly to the door and pushed against it. It did not move. He pulled the bobbin. The cord pulled through the hole, leaving the loose end in his hand. He looked at it. ‘This was cut,’ he announced quietly.

‘It must have broken.’

‘No. It’s a new piece of cord. Looks like nylon.’

It took a moment or two for the others to realize the significance of what had happened.

‘Do you mean — we’re shut in?’ breathed Rod.

‘That’s what I’m trying to tell you.’ Biggles went on in a voice of bitter self-recrimination. ‘It’s about time I had my head examined. Fancy walking into a ready-made trap as simple as that!’

Rod put his weight against the door. Nothing happened.

Biggles shook his head. ‘Why not try to pull the wall down? You’d have as much chance.’

‘What are we going to do about it?’

‘You tell me. I’m no demolition expert.’

‘But this is ridiculous!’

‘That isn’t the word I’d use. I’d call it serious. If you haven’t quite grasped what it means, I’ll tell you. We’re locked in. Somebody has locked us in. It follows, therefore, that we’re now in the hands of whoever was responsible. Until he feels like letting us out, it looks as if we shall have to stay here. That may be some time.’

‘All right. You needn’t be snooty about it,’ protested Rod.

‘I’m not being snooty with you. It’s myself I’m blaming. I deserve to be kicked from one side of the island to the other for being so hen-witted as to step into a cage, leaving the door open for anyone to shut. We suspected there were people here. Now we know.’

‘Where did they come from?’

‘I wouldn’t know, but they must have been in the building somewhere.’

‘We didn’t hear a sound.’

‘They took good care we didn’t.’

‘But what’s the idea?’

‘Quite simply, they’ve got us where they want us. They can now get on with what they’re doing without any interference from us.’

‘But they’d never have the nerve to leave us here to starve to death.’

‘How do we know what they might do? They were prepared to burn us to death, weren’t they? The only difference is, this may take a little longer.’

‘What do we do?’

‘Wait and see. It’s no use trying to squeeze through one of those windows even if we could get up to it. I don’t know about the chimney.’ Biggles walked over to it, and stooping, looked up. ‘I can see the sky, he said. ‘It’s big enough to get up, but there seems to be something in the way.’ He stood and reached upwards, groping, and brought down a shower of soot. He came out and brushed more soot off his hands. ‘No use,’ he said shortly. ‘There are bars across. The bright lads who lived here weren’t taking any chances of burglars getting in that way,’ he concluded, lugubriously.

‘What about Ginger?’ suggested Bertie, hopefully. ‘When we don’t come back he’ll know something has gone wrong and come to look for us.’

‘And maybe find himself in a trap, too. It’s hard to see what he can do single-handed against this lot.’

‘They may not know about him. They may think they’ve got us all boxed

in.'

'That's true. But it may be some time before Ginger gets uneasy about us. He'll expect us to come back the way we went, so his first thought will be that we've merely been cut off by the tide and are having to wait for it to go down.'

'What if Algy comes?'

'That'll keep one of them, if not both, on the beach. My orders were, the machine was not to be left unguarded.'

Bertie sighed. 'So it looks as if we may have a long spell here.'

'That's how it looks to me, short of a miracle.'

There was a rustling sound at the door. They stared at it expectantly. But it did not open. A piece of paper was pushed underneath. Biggles picked it up and read something that had been written on it. 'Listen to this,' he said softly. "If you'll give a guarantee to leave the island and not come back we'll let you out.'" He looked at Rod. 'What about it?'

'I'll see them in hell first,' raged Rod.

'If they mean what they say that's not likely to happen,' returned Biggles evenly.

'Are you going to answer that message?'

'This isn't the moment to do anything in a hurry. I don't know why we're standing. Let's sit down and think about it.'

'You might ask them what is the alternative,' said Bertie.

'All in good time. It might be better not to know. You may be sure it won't be anything pleasant.'

Biggles sat on the floor.

The light outside, seen through the windows, was beginning to fade.

'Could we do anything with my gun?' asked Rod, indicating his twelve-bore, which he had stood in a corner.

Biggles looked dubious. 'What do you think you could do with it?'

'Shoot the latch off.'

'The latch is on the other side. As I remember it, it was a hefty lump of wood, in keeping with the door. No, that wouldn't work with a door as thick as that. If you stood any distance away you'd simply plaster the thing with pellets. If you put the muzzle tight against the door you'd burst your gun. Sporting guns aren't made for that sort of thing. If you had a hundred cartridges it might be worth trying. Two or three would be worse than useless.'

'What about your automatic?'

'I'd rather keep my bullets.'

'Here's an idea,' said Rod. 'Hammer on the door with the butt. When they come to see what we want you tell them to open up and we'll talk about it.'

'Then what?'

'Shoot 'em.'

Biggles looked pained. 'Have a heart, Rod. We don't do that sort of thing

here.'

'That's what an American cop would do.'

'I can believe that, but it happens we're not in the United States.'

'Pity.'

Biggles went on. 'Sitting here I've been thinking. You've had a lot to say about this place being built with an eye for defence — narrow corridors, spiral stairway, and so on. If you're right, this is where the builders made a boob.'

'How?'

'Imagine the defenders had been forced back down the corridor. They'd find themselves in here, a cul-de-sac, with no way out. That doesn't strike me as being very clever.'

'Well?'

'Would they be such fools as to fall back into a death trap? That doesn't line up with the rest of the building.'

'What you're saying is, there should be a way out of here.'

'I would have thought so.'

'Then where is it? If there was a bolt-hole we could hardly have failed to see it.'

'Maybe they were smart enough not to make it too obvious. Only the people who had reason to know, would know where it was. If the place was besieged, and somebody wanted to get out to fetch help, it wouldn't be much use leaving by the front door, which is the only way in and out of the place I've seen so far.'

'I get it. All we have to do is find the bolt-hole.' Rod was a trifle cynical.

'That's it. Meanwhile, it'll be dark presently. Sitting here without a light isn't going to make the place any more cheerful. We've got some sticks so we might as well light a bit of a fire. That, at least, for as long as the sticks last, should give us enough light to see each other.'

'You think Ginger might see the light from the windows,' said Bertie.

'I'm afraid not, because if I've got my bearings right they overlook the briny ocean. But he's bound to look this way from time to time, so while daylight lasts there's a fair chance he may spot the smoke. That, of course, wouldn't tell him much, but he'd know someone was in the building. If we could make enough smoke, which I very much doubt as the sticks must be bone dry, we might even be able to make a signal in Morse. We'd only need to send three letters, S.O.S. If I know Ginger it wouldn't take him long to tumble to the meaning of that. No one else but us would be likely to make such a signal. We can do no harm by trying. I'll get the sticks while it's light enough to see what we're doing.'

'Jolly good,' complimented Bertie. Turning to Rod he added: 'He's a great lad for ideas.'

At this moment there was a sharp knock on the door and a voice said:

'What about it?'

Biggles answered: 'Come in and we'll talk about it.' Drawing his pistol he

advanced sharply to be behind the door when it opened.

It was not opened. The voice said: 'There's nothing to talk about.'

'You can go to the devil,' shouted Rod furiously.

'Suits me. If you change your minds kick the door, but don't waste any time about it because we're going out and may be away some time. Enjoy yourselves.'

With this taunt, footsteps retreated.

Biggles returned the gun to his pocket.

CHAPTER 9

TROUBLES FOR GINGER

LEFT to watch the beach Ginger was prepared for his job to be a boring one, and so it turned out. He did not expect anything of interest to happen and for a long time nothing did. His consolation was, the others would soon be back, so he would not be very long alone. It was still too soon for Algy to return considering all the things he had to do, but he could not deny that Biggles had been right in insisting that someone should be there to meet him in case the unexpected happened. It seemed unlikely that the trespassers on Rod's island would come near the beach or the harbour, because it was hard to see what purpose they could have in doing so.

The landscape, or the seascape, according to which way he looked, was disagreeable, and he found no pleasure in regarding it in any direction.

The first difficulty was to find a place where he could sit to watch, unobserved by anyone who might show up. There was no point in standing, anyway. The fire had burnt all the herbage on the bank, leaving nothing except bare earth and rocks. After looking about for some time for the best place, he got over the difficulty by hauling some rocks together to form a seat, getting his hands filthy in the process. He washed them as well as he could in the sea. It was when he turned to go back to his seat, which was nearly at the bottom of the bank at about the middle of the beach, that he noticed something he had not seen before, probably because, until the fire, it had been covered by heather. It was a narrow track running transversely down the bank from the top to the bottom. It looked as if it might have been an old sheep track, when there were sheep on the island. Beyond that he gave it no further thought.

Then, for hours, he followed a routine wearisome in its monotony, not from choice but because it was a duty and had to be done. For half an hour or so he would squat in his uncomfortable seat surveying the sea and the air above it for anything that might appear, plane or boat. He would then climb the bank to the ridge and spend ten minutes or a quarter of an hour reconnoitring the landscape, particularly the high ground in the region of the castle. And, of course, the castle itself. He saw nothing. Nothing, that is, except the ever-present gulls that screamed at him in passing. Their melancholy cries never ceased for a moment.

Occasionally he glanced along the foot of the cliffs beyond the harbour — not that he could see very far — in the hope of seeing the others coming back. He did not expect anyone else to come that way because, as far as he knew, this could not happen without an encounter with Biggles.

A little after one o'clock, as there was still no sign of them, he made a short break by going to the little cave where their stuff had been stored, this

having been pointed out to him, and helped himself to some biscuits and a partly used can of bully beef. With these he returned to his seat, where he ate a somewhat tasteless lunch without enthusiasm.

So time went on. He still followed the same routine. The sky had become overcast with a threat of more rain. Everything was grey. He himself felt grey.

It was not until four o'clock by his watch, and still the others had not returned, that he began to feel anxious about them. The tide was coming in and he feared they had been cut off. If they had it might be hours before they were back. He did not know how high the water was along the foot of the cliff and he dare not leave his post to find out. He spent more time watching from the ridge, thinking that if they had been cut off they might climb the cliff and come back along the top. They did not come. He was anxious, but so far nothing more than that.

When six o'clock came, and he was still alone, he began to get really worried. What could they be doing? Something must have gone wrong, for he was sure that when the party had set out Biggles had no intention of being away for so long. There seemed little hope now that they would return the way they had gone, for although the tide had turned the water was still high.

Time dragged on interminably. Ginger, bored and thoroughly wretched, could not remember a day that seemed so long. And as it crawled to a close, and still the others did not appear, his anxiety mounted to acute alarm. It was obvious that something unforeseen had happened, but what to do about it he did not know. He hated the thought of just sitting there doing nothing; yet he felt he should stay at his post.

Eight o'clock came. He took another long look from the ridge. It would, he knew, be the last, for already the scene was dim with twilight. The castle was a hazy silhouette. He returned to his seat. He could find only one redeeming feature in the situation. It was not raining, although the sky still looked as if it might, at any moment.

He began to think of his own predicament. The idea of sitting in the open all night, possibly in the rain, after his long day, appalled him. Where could he go? He had left it too late to find shelter. He knew there were more houses on the island because Rod had said so, but where they were he did not know. He had never seen them. The intention had been to find a cave for shelter, but as far as he knew this had not been done. Had all been well Biggles would have done something about it. Obviously all was not well, or Biggles would not have left it as late as this.

Night fell from a sky entirely covered with cloud, moonless and starless, to find him in a state of discomfort, indecision and perplexity. It was now too dark to do anything, so he remained in his seat, resigned. Visibility was down to a matter of a few yards, so there was no longer any point in trying to do anything, or see anything, either from the ridge or anywhere else. Feeling like a ship-wrecked mariner on a desert isle, he sank into a state of wretchedness, fed up with the whole business, for which he could hardly be blamed. Resting

his elbows on his knees and his chin in his hands, he stared moodily into the black nothingness that lay between the ocean and the sky, neither of which he could see. All he could hear was the eternal lapping of the waves on the beach. He hoped, of course, to hear the crunch of shingle, or even a hail from Biggles, for this was where the others would come to look for him, if they could — when they could. No such sounds came to allay his fears.

How long he sat there he did not know. It seemed an eternity. He lost count of time. Time no longer mattered. It signified nothing. Sleep in such a position was out of the question, and to make matters worse the night breeze had brought a chill with it.

Then, suddenly, an object, the first he had seen for a long time, caught his eye. It was a light, out over the open sea, how far away he found it impossible to judge. It flashed three times. Then it had gone, leaving him wondering if he had really seen it. He waited, watching for it to reappear. It did not. But he decided that he could not have been mistaken. The light could only have come from a boat, and the way it had flashed could only mean it was a signal. That was not all, he reasoned as, sitting up, he began to take an interest in life. The craft, whatever it might be, was not carrying the regulation lights or he would see them. He remembered the other boat. He also recalled that the plane Rod had heard had not carried navigation lights. It looked as if the same sinister operations were on the move. He awaited developments.

He had not long to wait. This time it was his ears, not his eyes that brought him information. From the direction of the sea came the *chug-chug-chug* of a small oil engine. From somewhere behind him and not far away came the sound of voices, drawing nearer. For a moment he thought it might be Biggles, Rod and Bertie, but a guffaw told him it was not them. Biggles never made that sort of noise. It was the silly laugh of a man who has had too much to drink.

The voices came on as if the men were coming to the beach. It was, he thought, the most likely place for them to come. The beach, the boat, the men. It did not take long to work out the association. He did not move, for unless the approaching men literally fell over him there was no chance of them seeing him.

Then he heard another, quite different noise. It was the curious blowing that a horse sometimes makes through its nostrils. So the men had the horse with them. This meant, quite obviously, that they had brought something, presumably a fair load, or had come to fetch something that would need a horse to carry it.

Listening intently he heard the men, how many he could not tell, making their way down the bank with a good deal of noise. Footsteps crunching on the shingle not far away told him they were on the beach. They made so much noise that it was evident they had no suspicion that anyone else was there. This rather puzzled him. Why was that? They knew Rod was on the island and that he was not alone. Why were they so sure Rod and his friends were

not where they had been all the time, near the harbour? That was where they would expect them to be. Yet here they were, behaving as though they were confident they had the place to themselves.

He caught a glimmer of the reason, or rather the confirmation of an uneasy suspicion that was creeping over him, when a voice said: 'Yeah. I reckon that was pretty smart. We've given 'em something to think about.'

This was followed by another laugh.

Ginger's muscles stiffened. Given *who* something to think about? He was afraid he knew. Biggles's party. It could refer to no one else, for the simple reason there was no one else on the island.

A light appeared on the beach. It was raised high, and waved. An answering light came from the sea. This time it remained steady. There was a hail. Oars splashed. A voice called: 'Everything all right?' Another answered: 'Yes. The stuff's here.'

More voices, as if a number of men were on the beach.

Ginger prayed for one short spell of moonlight so that he could see what was going on. None came, so he remained in ignorance.

Now came sounds that completely baffled him. Shouts, cries, sharp orders punctuated with heavy bumps. Presently he arrived at what he was sure could be the only explanation. The boat, or a boat, was being loaded or unloaded.

This was too much for his curiosity. There, right beside him, was the answer to the mystery of why the men were determined to keep the island to themselves. At any risk he had to find out what it was, for such an opportunity might not occur again. He began to feel his way forward, no easy matter with rocks projecting at all angles from crumbling peat and earth made slippery by rain. Once he held his breath as a rock on which his hand was resting came away under his weight and crashed on the beach, taking debris with it.

'What the devil's that?' said someone.

'Aw! It's nothing,' came an answer. 'Just a rock. That's where we had the fire. With no heather to hold 'em more'll be coming down for some time.'

Ginger breathed his relief, and moved on until he was on the beach within yards of the speaker, yet all he could see were vague shapes moving against the light. There seemed to be a lot of them. Once he caught a glimpse of a man with a large object on his shoulder. There was another bump as if it had been dropped on something hard. Once, too, an upturned torch passed over a sail, offering him a fleeting view of a recognition cypher painted on it. 722, he noted. A voice called: 'That's the lot, Joe.'

'Okay, Bill, see you Thursday.'

'We'll get a good load ready for you. There's some talk of the Navy taking over the island so we may have to shift.'

'Who says so?'

'Some friend of Macaster.'

'Well don't waste any time. We'll get along.'

The lights went out. Oars creaked in rowlocks. Footsteps crunched in the

loose shingle. The horse snorted as if it had been struck.

It was at this juncture that Ginger's luck deserted him. He heard the rattle of pebbles become suddenly louder, as if they had turned towards him. He threw himself flat, face downwards, trusting not to be seen, aware that on the stones it would be impossible for him to run without being heard. In such darkness he was fairly confident he would not be noticed. Nor, perhaps, would he have been had it not been for the horse. It snorted and shied, causing the man leading it to be dragged and so stumble over him.

'What the hell's this?' he shouted, in a voice stiff with alarm.

A torch flashed on. Realizing he could no longer hope to evade discovery, Ginger would have run. He started to scramble to his feet with that intention; but before he was properly up arms had closed round his neck, holding him in a vice-like grip. He struggled desperately to free himself, but strong hands gripped his arms. He fought like a wildcat, but his struggles ended when a fist landed on his jaw with a force that nearly knocked him out. Dimly, as he strove to keep his senses, he heard a voice say: 'I wonder how long he's been there? You said we'd got the lot.'

'I thought we had. How was I to know there was another one?'

'What are you going to do with him?' asked a different voice.

'We can talk about that later, when we find out who he is,' said a third voice. 'Let's take him along where we can have a good look at him. We might put him with the others. He'll be safe enough there.'

'Better make sure he ain't heeled,' advised someone.

Hands ran over Ginger's jacket and trouser pockets, and of course the gun was found.

'What did you reckon to do with this?' growled the man who removed it. 'Never mind. I can do with a spare.'

'Mind he don't give us the slip in the dark,' advised one of the gang.

'I'll see to that.' The speaker tied Ginger's hands and passed the horse's lead rope through his arms. 'I reckon that'll do. Let's get along.'

So began a tiresome walk across the moor in the direction of the castle.

Compelled to walk close beside the pony Ginger could not see very much, but what he did see dismayed him. There were no fewer than six men in the party, and he felt sure Biggles was not prepared for anything like that number. Bumping sometimes against the pony as they crossed the rough ground, he noticed it carried a pack saddle with a load of something lashed to it. It felt soft, and he made it out, by its shape, to be contained in a sack. There were in fact two sacks, one on each side.

As they tramped along he kept thinking of what had been said and tried to arrive at the precise meaning of the words. He was afraid they could only mean that Biggles and the others had already been captured. He derived a crumb of comfort from the knowledge — if this was correct — that he was to be put with them.

He was still pondering the situation when they arrived at the castle. He was

released from the horse which was led away, presumably to be unloaded. Inside the hall his hands were freed, but he was still held in no uncertain fashion.

‘What brings you here?’ he was asked.

‘You,’ returned Ginger, briefly.

‘So that’s it.’

‘I’ve told you.’

‘Smart, eh? Well let me tell you something. Before I’m through with you you’ll wish you’d stayed home.’

In the light of the torch Ginger’s breast pocket was emptied. The man, apparently the leader, went through the papers it had contained. In doing so he came upon something that seemed to amuse him, for he chuckled and said: ‘My Gawd! If we ain’t caught a copper!’

Some of the others appeared to find nothing funny in this. Looking alarmed, one said: ‘What’s he doing here?’

The question was put to Ginger, who answered: ‘You should be able to guess that in one.’

‘I see. Now you can do a bit of guessing.’ Ginger was led through the main room and down the corridor to a door. A latch was raised. The door was opened a little way and he was thrust inside, into pitch darkness, with a force that sent him sprawling on the floor.

CHAPTER 10

A MYSTERY SOLVED

NOT a great deal of light found a way through the narrow windows of the castle kitchen in the broad light of day, but with night beginning to draw its curtain slowly across a sky already grey with low cloud, it was as much as Biggles, Rod and Bertie, could do to see each other.

As Biggles had remarked, to spend the night in utter darkness was not a pleasant prospect; therefore, as the footsteps of their captors receded along the corridor, he returned to the task he was about to begin when the interruption had occurred. This was to light a fire using the twigs and sticks in the recess, which it was assumed had been brought in for that purpose by a previous tenant.

The fire, however small, would at least enable them to see each other. This, of course, could only continue for as long as the fuel held out; but with care it could be made to last for some time. At all events it was better than nothing.

While Rod and Bertie crumpled one or two envelopes from their pockets to serve as the paper necessary for giving the fire a start, Biggles, on his knees, clawed the sticks clear from the bottom of the recess into the room. The stuff was mostly flimsy, probably bog myrtle, a shrub which flourished in the damp places of the island. He finished by scraping the bottom for the last few twigs, every one of which would be useful.

Suddenly he stopped what he was doing. 'Just a minute,' he said slowly, in a strange voice. 'What have we here?'

As the entire floor had been paved with large, square-cut slabs of stone, it had been supposed, naturally, that the paving would be carried into the recess. And so, as a matter of fact, it had been; therefore the reason for Biggles's exclamation was not immediately apparent to the others when they stepped forward to look.

'What is it?' asked Bertie. 'What have you found?'

'I'm not quite sure,' returned Biggles, who was still kneeling with his right hand in the recess as if he was feeling something.

'Can't you see?' queried Rod.

'No. Show me a light.'

Rod, who carried matches instead of a petrol lighter, the better to light the cigar he sometimes smoked, produced a box. He struck a match and held it low, by Biggles's shoulder. 'What does it feel like?' he questioned.

'It feels like one of those handholds you can put your fingers through; the sort of thing you see in a manhole cover over a drain. An inspection pit I think it's called. It's stuffed up with dirt. I'm trying to clear it to see if I can get my fingers through. Yes, that's it. I've got hold of it now.'

'What about it?'

‘Don’t you see? It can only mean one thing. This particular slab was intended to be lifted. What other reason could there be for giving it a handle? There’s no other explanation.’

‘The slab covers a drain, I guess.’

‘Why put a drain in here?’

‘For swilling down the floor.’

‘Could be. But why put it in an awkward place like this? Why not knock a hole through the wall, as was done with the sink?’

‘Search me.’

Biggles was tugging. Nothing happened. ‘I’ll tell you something else,’ he went on. ‘Even with a handle to grip, it would need a man of more than ordinary strength to lift a flagstone this size and weight. You can only get at it by kneeling, and then you can’t get a straight pull.’

‘Could it be a well?’

‘It might be.’

‘Instead of arguing about it, why not have another go at lifting it?’ suggested Bertie.

Biggles obliged, without result. He got to his feet. ‘Here, Rod, you have a go. You’re the strong man of the party.’

Rod took up the position Biggles had vacated. He sat back on his haunches and strained until his back was bent like a bow. ‘No use,’ he said, relaxing. ‘It’d need a crane to shift it. As the thing’s arranged I doubt if any one man could move it. You can’t get a straight pull. The angle’s all wrong.’

‘That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you. The only way you could get a direct pull would be by getting into the recess, and then you’d be trying to lift your own weight as well as the slab. No. That isn’t the answer. Yet I’m certain that slab was intended to come up. I don’t get it. How was it dropped into place, anyway? Tell me that. The difficulty would be the same. Worse, in fact. That slab was cut to fit, and it does — exactly. Anyone trying to lower it into its final position would stand a good chance of losing some fingers. I’d be sorry to try it.’

‘Yet obviously somebody did it,’ murmured Rod.

‘Tell me how,’ requested Biggles.

Rod shrugged. ‘Beats me. One thing I didn’t expect to find here was a Chinese puzzle.’

‘What about that wheel affair, higher up?’ put in Bertie ‘Could that have something to do with it?’

For a moment there was silence. Then Biggles said: ‘I think you’ve got something there, Bertie. Wait a minute. Let me think.’

‘Shall I light the fire?’ suggested Bertie. ‘We might as well see what we’re doing, or trying to do.’

Biggles did not answer the question. He sat down again and stared into the cavity. After a little while he said: ‘I believe I’ve got it. Hand me the binoculars, one of you.’

Bertie fetched them. 'I'm dashed if I can see how these are going to help,' he remarked.

'Maybe I can show you, although I wouldn't care to bet on it,' answered Biggles, as he took the glasses.

As is common with field-glasses they had a strap to enable them to be slung over the shoulder. This strap was attached to the case by a buckle at each end, so that it could be removed if so desired. Biggles took off the strap and handed the rest back to Bertie. The others watched in silence as he passed the strap through the handle in the slab. He then passed the strap over the wheel. 'This, of course, was done originally with a length of rope,' he observed.

By this time the others understood what he was doing, or hoped to do.

'Not quite long enough,' he said. 'You wear a belt, Rod. Let me have it for a minute.'

Rod unbuckled his belt and handed it over. 'Steady how you go with it,' he requested anxiously. 'I don't want to walk home with my pants over my arm.'

'Better than not being able to walk home at all,' replied Biggles, as he attached the belt to the binoculars strap. This left a loose end rather more than a foot long. He handed it to Rod. 'Now pull,' he ordered.

Rod pulled. Nothing happened.

Bertie groaned his disappointment.

'Pipe down — we haven't finished yet,' growled Biggles. 'All this primitive engineering wasn't for nothing. It was to enable the slab to be put in and lifted out. It was done once so it can be done again. As it may not have been used for hundreds of years you'd expect it to stick a bit.' So saying Biggles took out his penknife and for some minutes worked the blade round the edges of the slab.

'Now see what you can do together,' he requested. 'Take it slowly and gently. Don't try jerking or the strap might break.'

Rod took the strain, and as there was not enough of the belt for Bertie to hold at the same time, he put his arms round Rod's waist.

'Now. Both together,' said Biggles tersely. 'Gently — gently — it's coming.'

Biggles's eyes were on the crack nearest to him. Slowly, it widened. Then, suddenly, so suddenly that Bertie went over backwards, the slab rose up on end to expose a square hole as black as a tomb.

'Don't let it go,' snapped Biggles. Lying flat on his back he put a foot against the slab and pushed it right back against the wall. 'Okay,' he said, as he got up, grinning. 'There it is.'

'Jolly good,' said Bertie.

Biggles went on: 'I don't like saying "I told you so", but you'll forgive me if I remind you that I said there should be a bolt-hole somewhere at this end of the castle. If this isn't it I'll take back what I said.'

'Let's make sure of it,' said Rod. 'And while you're at it you can hand me

back my belt.' He was standing holding up his trousers.

Biggles removed the straps, which were no longer necessary, and gave Rod his belt. This done he leaned forward, peering into the hole. 'Can't see a thing. Lend me those matches again, Rod.' He took the box and struck one. 'Steps,' he announced. 'Steep ones, too. That must mean a tunnel leading to the open.'

'How do you know it ends in the open?'

'I can feel cold air on my face. I felt it as soon as the slab came up.'

'Why are we talking?' inquired Bertie. 'Let's press on and get out. I've been in here long enough.'

Biggles hesitated a moment. 'I'd as soon be kicked as go down that hole. I'm no mole. However ...'

'Better test the slab to make sure it can't fall, and trap us in case we have to come back,' cautioned Rod.

Biggles tested it for security. 'That's all right. I'll go first.'

Moving forward, legs first, he felt with his feet for the top step and lit a match. 'There are only five or six steps,' he told the others. 'I'll go to the bottom and give you a light. Don't forget your gun, Rod. Bertie, you bring the glasses. When we get to the bottom you can give me any odd scraps of paper you have. By burning them we can save matches. We may have some way to go, so we can't afford to waste any.'

Moving with care, one foot at a time, he went on to the bottom of the steps, and there, very soon, the others joined him.

They were now in a narrow tunnel, cut through the living rock, going down at a fairly steep angle. With Biggles still leading the way they proceeded, an occasional match being struck and, when it was nearly expended, a piece of paper being lighted. This was a precaution against accident rather than a necessity, because they could feel their way; but, as Biggles remarked, it was no place to risk a fall. There might be more steps, or even a hole.

The air became noticeably cooler as they went on with a draught on their faces. Once Biggles stopped and said: 'Listen.' Up the tunnel from somewhere ahead came a sound as if pebbles were being poured from one pail into another.

'The sea,' said Rod.

'We can't have much farther to go,' asserted Biggles.

They went on, and a few minutes later there appeared in front of them a patch of grey that could only be the open air.

'Not quite dark yet,' observed Biggles.

'Jolly good! We've done it!' exclaimed Bertie.

'Let's wait until we're out before we start to crow,' said Biggles cautiously.

'I don't see what can stop us now, old boy.'

'We should look silly if the tunnel ended half-way up a cliff. We've no rope.'

Nothing more was said. The journey ended, and there, eight or ten feet

below them, lay the sea, showing its teeth in a long line of breakers.

‘So this is where we wait,’ said Biggles, in a resigned voice. ‘We can’t get back to the beach, or anywhere else for that matter, while the tide’s as high as this.’

The waves were in fact biting at the foot of the cliff, the spray reaching their faces.

‘We might as well sit down,’ added Biggles. ‘There’s nothing we can do about it, so we shall just have to wait.’

‘Say, they certainly made provision for trouble in the old days,’ remarked Rod. ‘What a bolt-hole. No doubt a boat was kept here so that anyone could get clean away if things went wrong. It’d take some nerve to follow desperate men through that tunnel.’

‘We must have passed below when we were on our way to the castle. It’s only a small exit, so I’m not surprised we didn’t see it. If we had we should have taken it for an ordinary cave, anyway.’

Bertie spoke. ‘I’d like to see the faces of those stiff’s who locked us up when they find we’ve gone. How about going back and dropping the slab into place? That’d get ‘em guessing.’

‘It isn’t worth bothering about,’ decided Biggles. ‘They’d soon find out which way we went. How long it’ll take them to discover we’ve gone depends on when they feel like opening the kitchen door. They can follow us if they like. As Rod said a moment ago it’d take a bit of nerve to come through that tunnel not knowing how far we were in front of them. They might meet a bullet coming the other way.’

‘How long do you reckon we shall have to wait here?’ asked Rod.

‘Not too long, I hope. As far as I can judge the tide’s at full flood, so it should soon be on the turn. We can wait. I’m not in such a hurry that I’m prepared to risk being drowned trying to get through those rocks while waves are breaking over them. We’ve done pretty well so far. Let’s be satisfied with that and take our time.’

There for a while the conversation ended. There was nothing left to say.

CHAPTER 11

HARD GOING

WHEN Ginger had been thrust with almost brutal violence into the kitchen, he had fallen on the stone floor with a force sufficient to really shake him. He had saved his head with an outflung arm, but only at the cost of a severe blow on the elbow; therefore, seething with anger, although this did not help matters, he sat for a moment or two where he had fallen, holding the bruised arm, while he recovered his composure.

He found himself in pitch darkness, from which, to his mounting astonishment, there came no sound. He fully expected — indeed, he was quite sure — someone would speak. From what had been said by his captors, he had convinced himself that Biggles and the others were prisoners and that he was to be put with them. The words he had heard could have no other meaning. Consequently he found the silence more than somewhat strange. In fact, alarming.

‘Biggles,’ he said quietly.

There was no answer.

‘Biggles, are you there?’ he said loudly.

Still no answer.

‘It’s me — Ginger.’

The words echoed eerily in the empty room.

Rising to his feet he felt for his lighter which, being in his waistcoat pocket, had been overlooked when he was searched, possibly because of the interest in his gun. He flicked it on, and looking round the room saw at once that he was alone.

There he stood, completely taken aback. He couldn’t understand it. All his preconceived ideas of exchanging news with the others were swept away at one stroke. What had happened? He closed his lighter, in order not to waste fuel, while he tried to adjust himself to a situation which had him baffled. He went over in his mind what had been said on the beach, and again on reaching the castle, but this brought no solution to the mystery. He was forced to the conclusion that he had gone wrong somewhere, had taken too much for granted. He was torn between being glad and sorry that he was to work things out alone, after all. He would have liked company, but it was a relief to know that Biggles was outside — or so he now had reason to hope.

Again he clicked on his lighter and now went to examine the door. It did not take him long to discover there was no way of opening it. The bobbin that should have lifted the latch, with the cord attached, lay on the floor. He picked it up and looked at it. Why was it on the floor? Looking closely at the end of the cord he saw a clean cut. It had not frayed through and broken. No, he reasoned. The cut had been deliberate. Why? He realized of course that the

cord must have been severed outside the door; by someone in the corridor. To that person it would not matter if the cord was cut, because if he wanted to open the door he could do so by merely lifting the wooden latch. But it would be a different matter if he was inside and wanted to get out. With no means of lifting the latch it would be impossible.

That, Ginger saw clearly enough, was his position now.

What was the object of all this? His thoughts ran on, striving to solve a problem that was not as easy as it might appear. Had someone else been in the same fix as the one in which he now found himself, and if so, who?

Obviously, as the previous occupant, assuming there had been one, was no longer there he must have been taken out. Or had he managed in some way to get out? This seemed possible, because had the occupant, or occupants, been taken out, there would have been no purpose in shutting the door.

He looked at the windows. A glance was sufficient to tell him that escape that way was not possible. They were much too narrow.

It was not with any real hope of finding an exit that he walked round his prison, examining everything as a matter of course. He perceived the place had been a kitchen. In walking on he came upon the loose kindling sticks which, for some unknown reason, had been thrown about the floor haphazard, although one or two handfuls of twigs had been carefully arranged in the fire-place. Under them was a small white object, apparently a scrap of crumpled paper, and the thought struck him here was a way of saving the gas in his lighter. He could light a fire.

Kneeling, he was actually holding the little flame to the paper when he noticed some words typewritten on it. It was sheer curiosity that caused him to withdraw what he discovered to be a crushed envelope. It carried a stamp, so evidently it had been through the post. Smoothing out the creases he read the name and address. This resulted in a shock that set his nerves tingling, and went far to providing the answers to the questions that had been exercising his mind.

The letter had been addressed to Bertie at their London flat. So that was it, he thought, his brain racing. It was unlikely that Bertie had been there alone. Biggles and Rod must have been with him. They had been captured, and this is where they had been put. Where were they now?

He applied the flame, now getting weak, to the envelope and tucked it under the twigs. A little fire sprang up, setting shadows flickering. He reached for some more substantial sticks to keep it going, and in so doing he saw the hole in the floor of the recess. This, naturally, brought him to an abrupt stop in what he was doing and put all other ideas out of his head. He crept nearer to the hole and stared at it, trying to see into it. Was this the way out? The way the others had gone? It seemed probable; in fact, almost certain. But he didn't lose sight of the possibility that it might be a trap. Unless it was simply a cesspool for kitchen waste, another possibility, it had to lead somewhere or there would be no purpose in it.

While, acting on the principle of look before you leap, he still hesitated, yet another thought occurred to him. If this was indeed a way out of the castle his captors could have known nothing about it, or they wouldn't have been so stupid as to use the place for a lock-up.

Creeping to the edge of the hole and holding his lighter low, he peered in and saw the steps. This discovery cheered him, gave him confidence in what they promised. He called softly: 'Biggles! Are you down there?'

There was no answer; but he didn't seriously expect one.

Unless he was content to remain a prisoner, which he was not, there was now only one course open to him. It took a little nerve to lower himself into a pit of unknown depth, but he went on down and in due course found himself in a tunnel. A draught of cool air on his face encouraged him by what it implied, and the rest, in the light of his fast-failing little flame, was comparatively easy. Eventually he came to the end of a nerve-testing journey to find himself, like a rabbit looking out of its burrow, on his knees at a hole in the face of the cliff. Somewhere below in the darkness he could hear the sea lapping the shore.

He ascertained how far he had to drop by the simple expedient of throwing down a small piece of rock. The next problem was the state of the tide, for he was unwilling to find himself cut off. He couldn't recall the exact state of it. Looking at his watch and after searching his memory, he thought it should be on the ebb. Anyhow, by this time he was sure Biggles and the others had left the castle by this route, and as they were not in the tunnel it could only mean they had gone on. If it was safe for them it must be safe for him, he reasoned.

His mind made up, he lowered himself to the full extent of his arms and dropped. He landed on a patch of shingle mixed up with small pieces of rock. He stumbled but did not fall. Recovering, he stared into the darkness but could see little. The water sounded dangerously close. He thought he could just make out the irregular line of the waves as they broke, but he wasn't sure. How far he would be able to get in such conditions, or before the sea brought him to a halt, he did not know, but he resolved to take a chance and move on as far as possible. His lighter, useless out of doors, he returned to his pocket. Then he set off.

Anyone who has tried, in daylight, making his way over seaweed-festooned rocks that were recently under water, will appreciate what this was like in the dark. Ginger spent a good deal of time on his hands and knees, groping at what was in front of him. Several times he fell, sometimes in a pool of water and sometimes on a rock, jolting himself but doing no serious damage. He didn't care as long as he was able to make progress. Before it ended the journey had become a nightmare, one of those that seem to go on and on interminably.

His relief, when a vague silhouette told him that he had reached the harbour, need not be described. It can be imagined. He sank down, wet through, filthy, aching from bruises and utterly exhausted.

Having had a rest, and finding himself getting cold, he got up. The big question now was, where were the others? Were they, or were they not, in the vicinity? Assuming they were no longer in the castle, they would make for the harbour or the beach, expecting to find him in one place or the other. He tried calling. There was no answer, so that settled one question. They were not at the harbour — unless his voice was drowned by the incessant splash of waves on the shore. In that case, if they were anywhere about, they would be on or near the beach. What he feared was, not finding him where they had left him, they would go to look for him. That meant, knowing nothing about his adventure, they might be anywhere.

He was weary of walking but decided all he could do was get nearer to the beach. Slowly he made his way towards it, and he still had a little distance to cover when, to his unspeakable relief, a hail came floating along on the breeze. Someone shouted ‘Ginger.’ He recognized the voice. It was Biggles.

‘Here,’ he yelled, thinking that if Biggles was prepared to shout he could do the same. ‘Here I am!’ He went on, unsteadily, towards the beach, calling at intervals and Biggles answering. And so, presently, they met. Rod and Bertie were there.

Biggles opened the conversation. ‘Where the devil have you been?’ he demanded curtly. ‘We’ve been looking all over the place for you.’

‘You couldn’t have looked in the right place,’ answered Ginger, coolly, nettled by this reception, or perhaps because he was bone tired.

‘Where should we have looked? I told you to stay here.’

‘You might have tried the castle. In the kitchen, for instance.’

‘What are you talking about? We’ve been there.’

‘I know. So have I. I’ve just come from there. It was kind of you to show me the way out.’

This remark produced a short silence. Then Biggles went on: ‘Are you telling us you’ve been in the castle?’

‘I have, and I didn’t tramp all that way from choice, believe you me. I went because I was tied to a horse. And with the horse was not one man but six. Now think that over.’

‘Great grief! I’m sorry if I sounded a bit rattled, but we were worried about you. You’re saying you were captured and taken to the castle?’

‘That’s it, but it’s making a short story of a long one. Let’s find somewhere to sit down because I’m about all in, and I’ve news that’s going to rock you on your heels.’

‘How did you get away?’

‘The same way as you did, I imagine. They threw me in the kitchen. And I can tell you this. They thought you were still there. How about a cup o’ tea? Can’t we go somewhere and make one? It seems weeks since I had a respectable meal.’

‘It’ll be getting light soon. Then we shall be able to see what we’re doing instead of blundering about over these infernal rocks. Did you come along the

bottom of the cliff?’

‘Too true I did.’

‘Then you have my sympathy,’ consoled Biggles. ‘That’s the way we came. Squat down here for a minute or two and tell us what happened to you.’

For the next half-hour, by the end of which time the sky was turning a sickly grey, Ginger told the story of his adventure — or rather, misadventure. Nobody interrupted him. ‘That’s about the lot,’ he concluded, when he came to the point of his discovery of the bolt-hole.

‘Enough, too. You have had a wild night,’ said Biggles. ‘Without being unkind, I must say it was worth it for all this information you’ve picked up. What shakes me is *six* men. Apart from anything else, six men take some feeding. What devilment are they hatching here — a revolution? I’m beginning to wonder, taking the boat and its crew into account, how many men there are in this altogether. One thing sticks out like a sore thumb. If an organization of this size is at work here it must be engaged in a very profitable racket. You say the stuff that was being loaded or unloaded on the beach bumped when it was dropped as if it was hard?’

‘Yes. That’s the impression I got. The boat carried a sail, which gave me its number, but it was also fitted with a small oil engine. The stuff must have been heavy, or it wouldn’t have needed a pony to carry it. Incidentally, the stuff the pony carried back to the castle was in sacks. It felt soft. I know that because I kept knocking into it.’

‘You couldn’t see what the men were handling on the beach?’

‘No. Well, only very indistinctly. It was as dark as the inside of a black cow. All I can say is the parcels looked bulky and sort of round in shape. The bumps sounded like wood on wood. I’m talking of the things that must have been brought down from the castle and loaded on the boat.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘You know, chaps, with the limitations of this island, I feel the answer to all this must be staring us in the face, but I’m dashed if I can see it. Maybe one of us will get an inspiration presently. Let’s go to the grub cache and have something to eat with a gallon or two of tea. We’ve earned it. Something hot inside us may brighten our ideas.’

In the growing daylight they walked wearily over the rocks to the cavern where their food and other things had been stored. ‘I’d like to see the faces of those perishers at the castle when they discover we’ve done a flit,’ said Bertie, with a chuckle.

‘If they think they’ve got us on the run they’ve got another think coming,’ growled Rod. ‘It’ll take more than a bunch of roughnecks to push me off my property.’

While preparations for a pot of tea and some food were being made Biggles said: ‘Algy should be back today. I shall be interested to hear what the Chief has to say about all this. But the machine will present us with another problem.’

‘What problem?’ asked Rod.

‘The enemy are bound to see it arrive. They’ll hear it coming. That means we shall always have to keep a guard on it for fear of it being sabotaged.’

‘They wouldn’t dare.’

‘I wouldn’t like to bet on it. People will do anything if the stakes are high enough, and here they must be pretty high.’

Ginger stepped in. ‘By the way, I don’t think I told you, but the boat’s coming back on Thursday.’

‘How do you know that?’ asked Biggles sharply.

‘I heard one of ‘em say “See you Thursday, Bill”.’

‘Thursday. That’s the day after tomorrow. That should give us plenty of time to get organized to meet it. The first thing we must do is find somewhere to sleep. This living rough may be all right on a tropic isle, but in this sort of climate it’s a dead loss. The snag is, we must keep close to the beach to meet Algy as soon as he touches down. Otherwise he may land up to the neck in trouble. But I see the kettle’s boiling. Let’s have some tea. We can talk about this presently.’

CHAPTER 12

BIGGLES MAKES A PLAN

‘THAT’S better,’ declared Biggles, when they had finished their meal and emptied the teapot several times. ‘All I need now to make me a new man is a good wash and a shave.’

‘I need more than a wash,’ said Bertie. ‘What I want is a bath. I feel positively disgusting.’

‘Go jump in the sea,’ suggested Rod cheerfully.

‘I’m talking about a hot bath with plenty of soap,’ informed Bertie. ‘It’d need more than cold salt water to get me shining white again.’

This applied to all of them, for in broad daylight they could see the condition they were in: grimy, unshaven, their clothes torn, crumpled, and stained with sea water.

Said Biggles: ‘As we’re not provided with uniforms, this is where I put in a claim for a new suit.’ He was in a worse state than anyone, for his hands and face were black with soot from investigating the kitchen chimney. ‘Well, let’s make the best job we can of ourselves,’ he went on in a different tone of voice as he got to his feet. ‘I want to be on the beach ready for Algy when he comes. Reckoning he’ll leave base at daybreak, he should be here, if he’s coming today, around ten o’clock.’

‘What are you going to do about the people in the castle?’ asked Ginger.

‘Nothing. Let them come if they feel like it. After what happened yesterday the gloves are off, and if they want to play tough that’s all right with me. They’ll find us ready. Somehow I don’t think they’ll come near us — anyway, for a while. Knowing now, from what they found in Ginger’s pocket, that the police are on the job, they’ll be more worried than we are. I’d wager that at this moment they’re doing some fast talking.’

‘I’m with you,’ asserted Rod, cogently.

They completed their toilets, and ten o’clock found them once more on the beach, a reconnaissance from the ridge having revealed no sign of the enemy. It was a fair sort of day, the best they had had. There was still a lot of cloud, but occasional breaks allowed the sun to show itself and warm the air.

It was about half an hour later that, to the satisfaction of everyone, they heard the unmistakable noise made by a helicopter. It came straight on to the island, losing height, and a few minutes later had landed on the beach. The door was opened and Algy stepped down.

‘What cheer?’ he greeted, brightly. ‘What news?’

‘Plenty,’ answered Biggles. ‘But let’s have yours first. A lot depends on it. What are the orders?’

‘The Air Commodore says you’re to carry on.’

Biggles’s eyebrows went up. ‘Carry on doing what?’

‘Whatever you’re doing.’

‘That’s charming of him,’ returned Biggles sarcastically. ‘Isn’t he going to take any action?’

‘He said he’d like more definite information, if you can get it, before he acts. When I left him he said he’d talk things over with the Chief Commissioner. I must say he got on to the Admiralty right away and arranged for some frogmen to come over and have a dekko at Rod’s boat.’

Biggles looked disappointed. ‘They’ve been. Is that all they’re going to do?’

‘A salvage party will be along as soon as it can be arranged.’

‘That’s something, but I don’t see how it’s going to help us much. Did you bring the grub?’

‘Of course. Where are you going to put it?’

‘That’s something we haven’t decided yet.’

The conversation continued with everyone still standing beside the machine.

‘It looks as if you’ll have to go back again,’ went on Biggles, speaking to Algy. ‘A lot has happened here while you’ve been away.’ As briefly as possible he brought him up to date with the situation.

‘What are you going to do about this?’ inquired Algy, when he had finished.

‘We haven’t really thought about it. I was waiting for you, to hear what the Chief had to say. I thought he might suggest something. By the way, were there any fingerprints on that broken bottle you took home with you?’

‘Too true there were. I had to wait for identification, otherwise I’d have been back before this. The prints were those of a stylish crook named Neville Norton. He was released from Pentonville prison twelve months ago after doing a three year stretch. There’s a suspicion, but no proof, that he was instrumental in helping three time-servers to escape about six weeks later.’

‘Never heard of him. What was his fine?’

‘Lifting lorries on the Great North Road bound for London. He specialized in loads of whisky, apparently having been tipped off by someone when the stuff was on the way.’

Rod broke in. ‘If your Chief knows there’s a crook here what more does he want?’

Biggles shook his head. ‘It isn’t as easy as that. If a man has served his time he can’t be touched until he commits another offence.’

‘But he’s breaking the law here.’

‘That’s what we think, but we’ve no proof. Suspicion isn’t enough. That, I imagine, is why the Chief is holding his hand. Admittedly he’s trespassing, but that’s hardly a crime.’

‘You mean — you have to wait for a crook to commit another serious crime before you can do anything?’

‘That’s it.’

‘Sounds daft to me.’

‘It may, but that happens to be the law. Never mind that. It’s time we were making up our minds on our next move.’

‘What’s wrong with going up to the castle?’ suggested Algy. ‘It’s Rod’s property, so we don’t need a search warrant.’

‘There are at least six men behind those stone walls and at least some of ‘em carry guns. The Chief wouldn’t thank us for littering the place with bodies, some of which might be our own. There must be an easier way of tackling this than that. Meanwhile, the aircraft has become a liability. We daren’t leave it. If it was damaged we’d be grounded. That means, whatever we do we shall have to split up, always leaving someone on guard.’

‘Then what do you suggest?’ asked Algy. ‘I’m ready for anything you say.’

‘I’m sorry, but it looks as if you’ll have to go back to the Chief with the latest developments. Tell him the whole story. Say there are six men here and they’re armed. To try to arrest them will mean casualties. Strictly speaking, the only grounds we have for arrest are trespass and doing us grievous bodily harm. We can’t go on living rough as we have been doing. Aside from that, sooner or later this little island is likely to become a sniping ground. If the Chief doesn’t want that he’ll either have to send us reinforcements or give us direct orders. Meanwhile, we’ll hang on and do what we can to get things sorted out. We don’t want prisoners on our hands, fixed as we are. What could we do with them? It’s taking us all our time to look after ourselves.’

Algy looked puzzled. ‘After all this you still have no idea of what the gang is doing here?’

‘None. If I knew that I’d know better how we stood.’

‘Could it be a smuggling racket of some sort?’

‘What would be worth smuggling in and out of a place like this?’

‘Ask me something easier. Well, do you want me to push off right away?’

‘No. There’s no particular hurry. You’d better wait until we’ve decided on some sort of plan, so that when you go you’ll know what we have in mind. Somehow we’ve got to get into that castle. That’s where the answer to all this will be found. The only room we haven’t seen is the one behind that locked door. That must hide the kernel of this particular nut. Having got into the castle, how are we going to open that door?’

‘Shall I go and fetch you a bunch of skeleton keys?’ offered Algy.

‘It would take too long. I don’t want to spend the rest of my life here.’

Rod made a suggestion. ‘If we made a rush we might find the door open.’

‘I wouldn’t care to rely on that. It would be too much of a gamble. If things went wrong we could land in an ugly mess.’

‘It might take several cartridges, but it should be possible to cut the lock out with our guns; or so weaken it that we could bash it out.’

‘Our friends in the castle might object to that,’ returned Biggles cynically. ‘Don’t forget we first have to get to the door.’

‘Well, what are you going to do?’ asked Algy, a trifle impatiently.

Biggles walked over to the bank and sat down. 'Let me think about it,' he requested. 'It's no use going off at half cock. Ginger, you might slip up to the ridge to make sure there's no one about. We can't afford to be caught on one foot.' He buried his chin in his hands, staring at the pebbles round his feet. The waves, splashing, made lace curtains of foam on the beach. The sea-gulls cried and squabbled among themselves as they patrolled the shore line. There was no other sound.

Ten minutes passed. Ginger returned. 'Nobody in sight,' he reported.

The statement roused Biggles from his reverie. He sat up.

'Now listen, everybody,' he said quietly. 'I've worked out a scheme. We may see some snags later, but for the moment this is it. The first thing we've got to do, without any argument, is find quarters for ourselves if only to park the stores Algy has brought. There's no point in unloading them till we know where we're going to put them. Now Algy's here we're no longer confined to the beach area, because I'm sending the machine back with the latest news for the Air Commodore. Tell me, Rod, how far away is the nearest house, hut or shed, or even cow byre?'

Rod thought for a moment. 'There's an old croft standing in a slight hollow about, say, a hundred yards from here. Maybe a little more than that. As I remember, it isn't in too bad a state.'

'In which direction?'

Rod pointed. 'Behind the ridge at the far end of the beach.'

'Can it be seen from the castle?'

'Sure. It's in full view.'

'That sounds the sort of place I'm looking for. Are there any rocks near, or anything else to prevent the machine from landing there?'

'None that I can call to mind. There's a lot of heather. If we go there they might put fire to it and burn us out again.'

'They couldn't with the wind where it is. If it shifts we shall be ready.'

'What's behind all this?' questioned Algy.

'That's what I'm going to tell you. You can stop me if you see a weak spot in my plan. I'm trying to think of a way of getting into the castle, having first lured those crooks out of it. For that I shall need a bait, and I'm hoping, Rod, you won't mind taking that on. This is the order of things. The machine takes off and lands as near to the croft as possible. We then unload the stores and carry them inside. This operation will, I'm sure, be watched from the castle. After what's happened it's a safe bet that one of them will be keeping an eye in this direction. When we've finished unloading everyone except Rod will get into the machine, which then skips back to the beach, which can't be seen from the castle. Everyone except Algy jumps out. He'll carry straight on to report to the Air Commodore. Are you all with me so far?'

There was a general assent.

'Right,' resumed Biggles. 'This is now the position. Rod is alone at the croft. The rest of us will be on the beach. Algy will be on his way home. You

see what I'm getting at? I'm reckoning that the people in the castle will assume that Rod has been left here on his own while the rest of us have left the island by air. Naturally, Rod, being the owner of the island, he'd be the one most likely to stay behind.'

'I'm beginning to get the drift,' said Rod.

'All you have to do is hang around. Light a fire and cook yourself a meal if you feel like it. Smoke doesn't matter now. Take your gun and shoot something for the pot, but don't go far from the croft, because you're likely to have visitors. Those crooks will suppose, with you alone on the island, they have nothing to fear. They'll be along to see what you're up to. How long it will take them to make up their minds to do that I don't know, of course; but sooner or later their curiosity will get the better of them and they'll come.'

'What do I do when they come?'

'That's up to you. Ignore them or parley with 'em. They may try to come to terms with you. Say anything you like, but avoid trouble if you can. All I want you to do is keep them there.'

'Suppose they don't come?'

'In that case we must admit the scheme has misfired. It will have done no harm. The position will remain as it is now and we shall have to think of something else.'

'If I'm not being inquisitive, what are we doing while all this is going on?' inquired Bertie, polishing his eyeglass with great care.

'As soon as we're out of the machine, and we shall have to hop out pretty smartly, we shall hoof it along the bottom of the cliff to the landslide where we climbed up yesterday. We shall be on our way to the castle, and that's the only way we can go without being seen. The tide should be about right. We come up behind the castle. All we have to do then is wait for the gang to go down to the croft to see what Rod's doing.'

'Suppose they don't all go down?'

'I haven't overlooked that possibility. There shouldn't be so many left behind that we couldn't handle them, especially as we have the advantage of surprise. Even if three men are left there we shall be three against three, which is better than three against six. We've got to see behind that locked door, because that's where we shall find the answer to what's going on here; and until we know what that is we shall be stuck here, unable to do anything. Rod may love his little island, but I've had enough of it. Anyway, that's my plan, and I see no reason why it shouldn't work. It's better than sitting here doing nothing. The gang's not likely to come and tell us what they're doing. We've got to muscle in and find out. After all, that's why we came here.'

Ginger spoke. 'Okay. So we get in the castle. Then what?'

'If that door is still locked, and no key is to be found, we shoot the lock off by cutting it out with bullets. Anyhow, that's the idea, although whether it'll work out in practice remains to be seen. If we make a mess of the door — well, it's Rod's property. I'm taking a chance that on the other side of it we

shall find all the evidence the Chief needs to tackle the business as top priority.'

'Does he need all this evidence to handle a bunch of crooks?' asked Rod, with faint sarcasm. 'I'd have thought we'd enough already.'

'In his job it doesn't pay to take risks. He has to be sure of his ground, and I don't blame him. If a copper makes a mistake everyone's on him like a ton of bricks — questions in the House of Commons and all the rest of it. We'll get the evidence for him. Which reminds me. Ginger hasn't got a gun. You might give him yours, Algy. You can get another, although I doubt if you'll need one. And before you go be sure to give me some spare clips of ammunition. We shall need them for the door.'

'I'll do that right away in case I forget,' decided Algy.

He did so, and Biggles distributed the cartridges, saying: 'Has anyone any more points to raise?' When there was no answer he continued: 'Okay. Let's get on with it. If things go right, by sundown we should know all the answers.'

'If you bust that door the gang will know you've got the edge on 'em,' Algy pointed out.

'What about it? They can't get away. They've no boat. It doesn't come back until Thursday.'

'I was thinking that when they realize you know the lot, they'll come gunning for you.'

'I'm not worried about that. We've had more experience at that sort of thing than they have, I'll warrant. We shall get back to Rod as quickly as we can, and if the four of us can't hold 'em until the Air Commodore takes a hand, we'd deserve to be shot. But that's enough talking. Let's go. The sooner we get started the better.'

CHAPTER 13

BEHIND THE LOCKED DOOR

THEY squeezed into the aircraft with Rod in a front seat to point out the croft. All that was necessary was to hop over the ridge at the far end of the beach and there was the objective no distance in front of them. In less than three minutes the helicopter was standing in the heather a few yards from a tumble-down stone building, with its thatched roof in reasonable order and a cowshed near at hand.

They went in and were agreeably surprised to find the interior in better order than might have been expected. The great thing was, it seemed fairly dry, so the work of unloading the stores and carrying them inside was begun forthwith, an eye being kept on the castle which was now in full view on the higher ground. There was nobody in sight.

‘Okay. That’s the lot,’ said Algy, who had been handing the parcels out of the machine.

Leaving Rod standing in the open doorway with his gun under his arm, the others got back into the aircraft. ‘Good luck, Rod,’ called Biggles. ‘Remember, no shooting unless they start it.’

Rod waved acknowledgment with the cigar he had lighted and the machine skimmed back over the ridge to the beach, to hover at a height of a few feet. Algy remained in his seat.

‘Make it snappy,’ ordered Biggles, and the others jumped out.

The door was slammed and the helicopter swept up over the sea, heading south-east.

‘Keep going,’ said Biggles crisply, striding along the beach towards the harbour where it ended and the rocks began. ‘Got the glasses, Ginger?’

‘Yep.’

There is no need to describe in detail the rough journey along the foot of the cliff. They had done the trip before, so they knew what it was like. In broad daylight it was of course a different matter from covering the same ground in the dark, and they made good progress, with the result that in less than half an hour they had reached the landslide where the cliff had broken down to provide the only route to the top. Without stopping they went on up, making a fair amount of noise as loose rocks clattered down behind them. This caused them no concern, however, because all sounds, except the mewing of the gulls, were drowned by the noise of waves waging their everlasting war against the land.

‘Keep your heads down when we get to the top,’ ordered Biggles, panting from his exertions. ‘Let me take a peep first.’ Creeping the last few yards, he peered cautiously between two boulders. ‘Nothing doing yet,’ he told the others quietly. ‘Not a soul in sight near the castle, but I can see Rod pottering

about outside the croft. We shall have to wait.'

Close watch was kept, but the delay proved to be a long and tiresome one, and it was getting on for noon before Ginger, who was taking a turn at watching, was able to announce that five men had left the castle and were crossing the moor, going down the hill straight towards the croft.

'That's fine,' declared Biggles. 'Better than I expected. Like all that type, they believe there's safety in numbers. According to our reckoning, that leaves only one man at the castle to take care of things, and if I know anything he won't be looking this way. He'll be watching his pals to see what happens when they get to the croft.'

'I don't know where he is,' said Ginger. 'I can't see him.'

'All to the good. Let's make a dash for the outbuildings. Ready? Go!'

Keeping low, they sprinted across the intervening distance to the wall that marked the boundary of the stable yard. There was no shout of alarm, or any other indication that they had been seen, so after a pause for breath they went on to the rear wall of the castle itself. There was still no sound except the croak of a raven sitting on the roof.

'Wait here while I have a dekho round the front,' said Biggles softly. 'If the man isn't inside that's where I'd expect to find him, probably near the front door watching the party going to the croft. Stand fast.' Keeping close to the wall, he walked to the angle and, lying flat, peeped round. A glance told him all he wanted to know and he made his way back to the others.

'He's there, standing in the open just in front of the steps. I'll handle him. When you hear me whistle come at the double.'

'Could you see the rest of the gang?' asked Ginger.

'Yes. They're more than half-way to the croft. Rod's standing at the door waiting for 'em. I don't think they'll look round unless there's a lot of noise here. If that should happen we shall have to move fast, because if they do look back they'll see us. Once we're inside we shall be all right. From the croft to the castle, the going being uphill, should take them a quarter of an hour, anyway. But we've no time to lose. Wait for my whistle. I shouldn't be long. When you hear it come as fast as you can.'

'Fair enough,' said Bertie. 'This is more like old times.'

Biggles proceeded with his task. The big difficulty, of course, was to reach the man without being observed, but he thought he could see a way to get over that. Reaching the dry moat, he dropped into it, and then, with his gun in hand he walked quickly towards the front entrance. In this position, unless the man had moved, he was fairly safe, because being well below the level of the door he was out of sight.

The time came, of course, when he had to leave the moat, and this was the tricky part of the operation, not so much because of what the man might do to him as because a single shot would be enough to bring the gang back hotfoot.

Biggles crept to the lip of the moat. The man had moved a few yards and was now sitting on a stone, filling a pipe from a tobacco pouch. The gang had

nearly reached the croft.

Biggles now moved swiftly. He could get no farther without exposing himself, so nothing was to be gained by taking time over what he had to do. He had this advantage. When he emerged from the moat he came between the castle and the man who, with his eyes on his companions, therefore had his back towards him. He was in fact re-lighting his pipe, which apparently had gone out.

Biggles covered the distance in a dozen swift, silent strides. 'On your feet and get inside,' he rapped out, with iron in his voice.

The man, dropping his pipe, leapt up as if propelled by a spring, to stare stupidly into the muzzle of Biggles's gun. His lower jaw sagged in comical amazement.

'Get inside and keep your hands away from your pockets,' said Biggles shortly. 'I'm warning you, this gun's loaded and I'm prepared to use it.'

The man did not argue. He walked towards the door without a word.

Biggles whistled, and keeping close on the man's heels followed him through the door into the castle. There, within a minute, he was joined by Ginger and Bertie, both with guns in their hands. Without taking his eyes off his man, Biggles spoke to them. 'What's the rest of the gang doing? I hadn't time to look.'

'They appear to be talking to Rod outside the croft,' answered Ginger.

'Good enough.' Biggles addressed the prisoner. He had never seen the man before. He was an ordinary-looking type, short, thin-faced, but with nothing really remarkable about him. He looked startled, as he had reason to be. 'Talk straight and talk fast,' said Biggles tersely. 'Are you alone in the castle?'

'Yes,' was the answer, in a surly voice.

'If you're lying—'

'I've told you. The others are out.'

'What are you doing here?'

'That's for you to find out.'

'All right, if that's how you feel. But the game's up, whatever it is, so you're only making things worse for yourself. We're police officers and we're not standing for nonsense, so watch your step. Walk on, straight down the corridor. Stop when you come to the locked door.'

The man obeyed.

'Now stand with your back to the wall. Have you got the key to this door?'

'No.'

'Where is it?'

'The boss keeps it.'

'By the boss are you talking about Norton?'

The man's eyes went round at the mention of the name.

'I dunno his proper name.'

'You're a liar. Search him, Ginger.'

Ginger went through the prisoner's pockets and removed an automatic. 'No

key,' he reported briefly.

'Okay. Keep him covered. If he makes a move shoot his legs from under him. Bertie, go to the front door and watch if anyone looks this way when I fire the first shot. Don't show yourself.'

Bertie strode off.

Biggles gave him a couple of minutes and then, holding the muzzle of his gun two inches from the woodwork, close to the lock, fired. In the confined space the report sounded like the crack of doom. The air was filled with the acrid reek of cordite. He went close to the hole the bullet had made and putting his pencil to it ascertained that it had gone right through.

Bertie came back. 'They didn't look round, so they couldn't have heard it.'

'Good. Keep watching and let me know if they start coming back.'

Biggles returned to his task of shooting the lock out of the door. He fired again and again, five shots. The lock remained intact. He struck it with the butt of his gun but it didn't move. He reloaded and fired six more shots, cutting a series of holes to remove the lock bodily. That was more than it could stand, and it sagged inwards. Again he reloaded, taking a spare clip of cartridges from Ginger. Three more shots and the lock looked ready to fall out. Again he struck it with his gun and it fell inwards. Putting his shoulder to the door he threw his weight against it. It flew open, the lock and splinters of wood rattling on the floor. A pungent smell of peat mixed with the sickly aroma of malt floated out to combine with the now choking fumes of cordite.

Inside, a lamp, standing on a table, was burning, so there was no need to go any farther. All that it was necessary to see could be seen from the door. Half a dozen stone steps went down into a vast vaulted room, or series of rooms. The light revealed what looked like complicated chemical laboratory apparatus. Near it some casks stood on the floor. There was a heap of bottles and some sacks, some full, some empty.

For a few seconds Biggles stared into the long, stone, windowless chamber, while over his face crept an expression that would have been difficult to describe. He called Bertie.

Bertie came. 'They're still nattering,' he reported.

Biggles pointed. 'Take a look at this. How dumb can you be?' he added bitterly. 'The answer was so easy. It's time I had my head examined.'

'What is it, old boy?'

'A still. An illicit still.'

'I don't get it. What's a still?'

'A thing for making whisky.'

Bertie whistled softly.

Biggles shook his head sadly. 'We had all the clues. Scotland, peat and barley, adds up to Scotch whisky. And we knew Norton was a whisky thief. And I didn't guess it. Apparently he finds it easier to make than pinch on the Great North Road. He certainly chose the ideal place for the experiment. We can see now why he didn't want Rod here. Well, that's all we want to know.'

‘And now what?’ asked Bertie.

Biggles turned to the man still being covered by Ginger. ‘Remember you’re under arrest. There’s nothing I can do with you for the moment, so you can go where you like, but my advice to you is to stay here. You can’t leave the island anyway. Don’t try any tricks or you’ll only make things worse for yourself. Behave sensibly and it may be to your advantage at the trial. I said *may*. It isn’t a promise.’

‘You’ve seen all there is to see,’ muttered the man. ‘There’s nothing more I can tell you. I told Norton it’d end like this.’

‘In that case why did you join him?’

‘Because he gave me a chance...’

‘A chance to do what? Are you one of the men he helped to escape from Pentonville?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Why was he so anxious to get you out?’

‘He knew I used to work in a distillery and understood all about making whisky. This was his idea, not mine.’

‘Ah! So that was it. Your memory seems to be coming back. What’s your name?’

‘Larkin.’

‘Who flies the plane that comes here?’

‘A pal of Norton’s who used to be a pilot.’

‘What’s his interest?’

‘He put up the money for the scheme; not so much for the whisky racket as to have a holiday home for certain pals of his who had the money to pay. All I know about him is he runs a chain of night clubs in London.’

‘Queer place to choose for a holiday, wasn’t it?’

Larkin hesitated.

‘Come on,’ prompted Biggles. ‘You might as well finish the story. Who are these men who like a country life?’

‘Some of the fellers you’ve been looking for.’

‘Meaning men the police have been looking for?’

‘You’ve got it. Some didn’t think much of it here, but it was better than being on the run. They didn’t stay here long.’

Then what happened to them?’

‘I dunno. You can ask Norton. That was nothing to do with me.’

‘How long has this been going on?’

‘Six months or so.’

Biggles nodded. ‘You haven’t done too badly. If you hadn’t behaved like a pack of fools you might have lasted longer. How far are the local people on the mainland involved in this?’

‘So it was them who gave us away? I reckoned they would, sooner or later.’

‘They did nothing of the sort. You gave yourselves away by scuttling the

boat belonging to the man who owns the island.'

'I can see that. I said it was daft at the time. The locals got free whisky. That was arranged by Duncan, who comes from these parts. He's with Norton and the others now. These people'll do anything for whisky. You won't tell Norton I've been talking?' pleaded Larkin.

'You needn't worry about that,' returned Biggles. 'All right. That's enough for now. You'd better stay in the castle. You can tell Norton any tale you like when he comes back.' He turned to Ginger and Bertie. 'Come on. Let's get out of this.'

Leaving Larkin standing in the passage, they walked quickly to the door and out into the fresh air. After the fumes inside it was welcome. Biggles took the binoculars from Ginger and focused them on the croft. 'They're still talking, but they look as if they are about to leave,' he said.

'What are we going to do?' asked Ginger, as Biggles handed back the glasses.

'We're going back to Rod.'

'Straight across the moor?'

'Of course.'

'We shall come face to face with the gang.'

'What of it? When I tell them who we are, that we know everything, and that we're only waiting for a boat to take everyone off, knowing they've no means of getting away from the island they'll think twice before they try murdering the owner and three police officers. Let's get along. I can do with something to eat.'

'They've spotted us,' said Ginger, who was looking at the croft. 'Here they come.'

Biggles smiled faintly. 'It should be amusing to see how they react when I tell them they're all under arrest,' he murmured. 'Let's go and meet 'em.'

CHAPTER 14

BREATHING SPACE

BIGGLES, with Ginger and Bertie in close attendance, set off down the long, slightly undulating, heather-covered slope towards the croft. From the opposite direction came the men who had been there and were now hurrying back. Both parties walked openly in a direct line, so it was clear that the encounter would occur somewhere about half-way, which would be on the area blackened by the fire.

The weather, ignored during the business in the castle, had deteriorated. More sombre-looking cloud had rolled up, led by a wide front of nimbus trailing a slight drizzle which was fast reducing visibility. Any breeze there had been had dropped, hinting at a promise of fog. No one remarked on it, but it was evident that should these conditions persist, Algy, when he returned, might have difficulty in finding the island, never mind the landing ground. How far this was likely to affect the situation was a matter for surmise, but Ginger, for one, was by no means happy about it.

After walking in silence for a minute or two he said: 'I wouldn't have thought it worth while to go to all this trouble simply to make whisky, which can be bought anywhere.'

'At a price,' returned Biggles. 'Don't get wrong ideas about that. Whisky costs next to nothing to make. It's the tax, the excise duty, that sends the price sky high.'

'What they turn out here must be pretty poor stuff,' put in Bertie.

'Awful, I'd say. Immature whisky, which is simply raw spirit, is practically undrinkable. I've been told it tastes foul; but it has a kick like a wild horse, and that's how some people judge what they pour down their throats.'

'How do you suppose the gang sells the stuff?' asked Ginger.

'I'd say that question doesn't arise. You're forgetting something. According to that clot in the castle, the man who put up the cash for this outfit runs a string of night clubs — probably shady ones. By the time it gets to midnight some of the people who rot their livers in such places don't know what they're drinking, and couldn't care less. The thing is to get sozzled and kid yourself you're double the size you really are. Of course, the brain behind this racket might be blending this coarse stuff with a standard brand, in which case it might not be too bad. Having no experience of it, I wouldn't know.'

'I still don't see how it's financially worth while, considering the risks.'

'Mental arithmetic isn't my strong point, but look at it like this,' replied Biggles. 'The stuff they're brewing here probably costs not more than five or six shillings a gallon to produce. Retailled at, say five bob a nip in a night club, it must bring in something in the order of thirty pounds a gallon — practically all profit — and that's without watering it down. Done on a big enough scale

there's nothing wrong with that for a get-rich-quick concern. Apparently it pays, never mind how, or they wouldn't go on with it. There are not as many illicit stills in Scotland and Ireland as there used to be, but no doubt it goes on. Peat and water cost nothing, barley is cheap and the apparatus is simple. But here we are. I'll do the talking — not that I've much to say.'

The two parties had met. Both stopped, but neither attempted to bar the progress of the other.

Biggles was the first to speak. 'You're all under arrest,' he said stiffly. 'Get up to the castle and stay there.'

The leader of the other side looked, or pretended to look, incredulous. 'Would you by any chance be talking to me?' he inquired, in a ridiculous, affected voice.

'Cut out the baby prattle,' snapped back Biggles caustically. 'That won't help you. If you're Norton, yes, I'm talking to you. And that goes for the rest.'

Norton scowled. 'Who are you to give orders to us?' he asked, in a different tone.

'You should know by now, but I'll remind you in case you've forgotten,' returned Biggles frostily. 'We're police detectives from Scotland Yard.'

'And just what have you detected, may I ask?'

'Everything that's been going on here, and that should be enough to keep you out of mischief for quite a while. It's all washed up, and so are you. A boat is on its way here to take you off. If you're as smart as you think you are you'll take your medicine without making things any worse for yourselves.'

One of the men had put a hand in his pocket and Biggles had not failed to notice it. 'Leave that gun where it is, or before long you'll wish you had,' he said sternly. 'Don't try anything like that with me. That's all I have to say. Think it over. You can stay in the castle for the time being.'

So saying Biggles strode on, Bertie and Ginger with him. For some time none of them looked back. When Ginger did so he saw the gang still standing in the same place, apparently having an argument. He told Biggles.

'They've plenty to talk about, and being what they are they're not likely to agree,' stated Biggles evenly.

Rod had come out to meet them. He was smiling. 'Well, how did it go?'

Biggles answered. 'Fine. Couldn't have worked out better. Now we know it all. As I supposed, the answer was the other side of that door.'

'What's the racket?'

'There appears to be two, although how far they're tied up with each other is not yet clear. The first is a whisky distillation plant in your enchanting baronial mansion, which explains the persistent aroma of smouldering peat in the vicinity. That alone in such a place would have told an excise official what was going on.'

'It so happens, old boy, that we're not excise sleuths,' protested Bertie. 'We're ordinary cops.'

Biggles ignored the interruption. Speaking to Rod he went on: 'The still is

behind that door they kept locked. It leads to quite a lot of accommodation which I imagine you know nothing about. The booze is being produced in the cellars, which originally must have been quarters for the garrison or, as you said, dungeons for prisoners. Anyway, there seems to be plenty of room in them. When we're able to search the place properly we may find the gang has been living down there. They may not have intended to when they first came here. It may have been your arrival on the scene that sent 'em underground. They may have got the tip-off on the mainland that you were on your way, which would explain why you found nothing on your first visit.'

Rod looked astonished. 'What do you know about that! What else are they up to?'

'Running a country club, a hide-out in fact, for crooks on the run, escapists, and what have you.'

'How did you get to know about that?'

'The man they left on guard, when he saw the game was up, squealed. In the hope of saving his own skin he'll turn Queen's Evidence should we need him. I know the type. There's usually one like him in a gang. But what about you? How did you get on?' Walking while they had been talking, they had now reached the croft. 'You might lay on a meal, Ginger. This place gives one an appetite if nothing else.'

'How did I get on?' repeated Rod, grinning broadly. 'No trouble worth mentioning. They had the brass impudence to try to do a deal with me.'

'What sort of a deal?'

'They tried to buy me out.'

'How?'

'First they offered to take the place from me on a five year lease. Money no object, and all that. When I turned the proposition down they wanted to buy the island, lock stock and barrel, on hire purchase terms. I told 'em of course the place wasn't mine to sell. Then they said for a lump sum they'd take over the balance of my lease, never mind how long it had to run. I said nothing doing. They asked me why I was so anxious to live on such a lousy island; to which, naturally, I replied, if it was as lousy as all that why were they so mad to have it? Not being able to find an answer to that one, they invited me up to the castle to have a drink with them and talk it over. As you can imagine, I declined without thanks, reminding them of what happened the last time I was there.'

'Had they anything to say about that — I mean, the way we got out?'

'They said we'd been to a lot of unnecessary trouble. No harm was meant. They had no intention of keeping us there. They even tried to make me believe the latch had been broken by accident. I asked them what sort of a mug they thought I was? So the argument went on, which suited me, knowing you wanted me to keep 'em here for as long as possible. Eventually, when they saw there was absolutely nothing doing, they dropped the old pal line and began to get nasty, threatening to starve me out.'

‘What did you say to that?’

‘I told ‘em to go ahead, pointing out that as I had enough grub to last me a month that was likely to be a long job. At that they really showed their teeth, going so far as to hint that if I disappeared nobody would know how or where. From that I gathered your scheme for leading them to think I’d been left alone on the island had worked. They really believed that. When the man who’d been doing most of the talking pulled a gun I thought it time to enlighten him. They were standing with their backs to the castle, so I suggested they turned round and had a look at it; which they did. By that time you were all standing outside. Brother, you should have seen their faces when they realized how they’d been tricked. For a minute they really looked like murder, but with a twelve-bore pointing at ‘em at short range nobody seemed anxious to make the first move. That’s how it ended. Moving off, they went into a huddle to talk it over, and after a minute or two set off back up the hill.’

‘Great work,’ commended Biggles, smiling. ‘What a disappointing day they must have had.’

‘What happens now?’

‘First let’s get inside out of this confounded rain and recharge our batteries with some overdue food. After that — well, I don’t know. It needs thinking about. Actually, I don’t see how we can do much until Algy gets back or the Air Commodore sends over a relief party, so if they’re content to call a halt in hostilities so am I. Now we know everything, while they’re boxed up time isn’t all that important.’

‘If their boat arrives first it’s going to be awkward,’ Ginger pointed out as they sat on the floor round the variety of canned food he had opened. ‘They’d be able to get away to the mainland, anyway, and I don’t see how we could stop ‘em if they were prepared to shoot it out. Knowing what will happen if they’re caught, they’ll be desperate, and desperate men take chances.’

‘I was trying to get this business buttoned up without any musketry, so we can only hope it doesn’t come to that,’ replied Biggles seriously. ‘Their boat shouldn’t be here before Algy gets back, and I’m reckoning on him being able to tell us the Chief has everything under control. At a pinch I could send him back into the air to put out a call for help on the radio. He should be here some time tomorrow. When we hear him coming we’ll go down to the beach to meet him. I don’t see what else we can do for the moment.’

They continued with their meal, making the most of it. Outside, with the unbroken cloud practically on the ground and the drizzle falling from it thickening, visibility was down to a few yards. A sea mist did nothing to improve it.

‘This weather isn’t going to make things easier for anybody,’ observed Bertie lugubriously. ‘I’d like to see what I’m doing, if you get my meaning.’

‘I’d rather have the castle in sight,’ admitted Biggles. ‘But as the weather is beyond our control, as I’ve learned from experience, we shall have to put up with it.’

‘There is this about it,’ put in Rod, optimistically. ‘This rain will keep the heather so wet that it wouldn’t be easy to set fire to it. Without any wind to help it, I doubt if a fire could be kept going even if one was started.’

‘That’s one comforting thought, anyhow,’ conceded Biggles. ‘To have to spend the night on the open moor, if we were burnt out, would be no joke.’

‘The devil of it is, we wouldn’t be able to see ‘em if they decided to creep up on us,’ said Ginger.

‘We shall just have to see that doesn’t happen.’

‘Which means mounting a guard?’

‘Of course. We’ve got ears. Throw those empty cans around outside. If anyone kicks one we shall hear it. ’

The day wore on and came to a close without further incident. The weather showed no signs of lifting. Night fell from a sky as black as a moonless night can be, but in the living-room of the little house, with a small fire burning, it was snug enough.

Bertie, who had drawn the first guard, sat on an empty carton just inside the door with Rod’s gun across his knees. In such conditions, with its spread of small shot, it was of course a far more effective weapon than a single bullet automatic pistol.

CHAPTER 15

BUTTONED UP

THE night passed without trouble except for one minor disturbance when Ginger happened to be on duty. It came some time after midnight. The fire had been allowed to go out and he was squatting on the carton close to the open door when he was brought to the alert by the rattle of an empty can. Rattle is perhaps too definite a word. The sound was soft, but it had unquestionably been caused by the movement of a metal object. In the silence of the night it was clear.

Ginger was on his feet in a moment, peering into the darkness. Seeing nothing, he took a pace forward, instantly to be greeted with a spit and a scurry as if something had made off in a hurry. That told him all he wanted to know so he relaxed, recognizing a noise which could only have been made by a cat. Satisfied that it was a false alarm, he resumed his vigil.

The explanation came in the morning when he asked Rod if there were any wildcats on the island. Rod said he didn't know if there were any true wildcats, but he had noticed one or two common cats prowling about and concluded some must have been left behind when the place was evacuated. Left to fend for themselves they would of course go wild, or their progeny would.

'One was prowling round the house during the night,' explained Ginger. 'It must have tried to lick out an empty can. Gave me a fright.'

Daybreak brought an improvement in the weather in that the rain had stopped, although the sky was still overcast. The castle could not be seen as the high ground was enveloped in grey mist. The ridge between the house and the beach was a vague shape that might have been anything had they not known what it was. For the rest, what could be seen of the surrounding moor presented a miserable, rain-soaked spectacle, as depressing as a landscape could be.

'I'm afraid Algy won't be happy trying to get down in this,' said Biggles, looking worried as he relit the fire for morning tea and breakfast. 'What a climate.'

'It's early yet, old boy,' consoled Bertie. 'It may brighten up a bit later.'

'You might take a stroll as far as the beach to check how the tide goes,' requested Biggles. 'As he's landed here before, he might try to put the machine down close to the croft; but if I were in his position I'd make for the beach where there's more room. It may take him all his time to get down even there without bumping his undercart on the rocks.'

'Don't empty the teapot before I get back,' said Bertie, as he went out.

In a matter of seconds there was a gunshot and he returned with alacrity.

Biggles had jumped up from the fire. 'What was that?'

‘Some dirty dog had a crack at me.’

‘Are you sure the shot was fired at you?’

‘Too true it was. I heard it whistle.’

‘What direction did it come from?’

‘I couldn’t be sure but I think it came from the ridge — somewhere in that direction, anyhow.’

‘Now what are they up to?’ muttered Biggles, going to the door and looking out.

Rod spoke. ‘If you want my opinion I’d say their play is to keep us cooped up in here.’

‘Hm.’ Biggles frowned. ‘I didn’t consider that possibility. If they could keep us here until their boat comes they might get away with it after all. A few men placed along the ridge would make getting to the beach an uncomfortable business. But whether we like it or not we shall have to do it. Algy, suspecting nothing, will probably land on the beach. That’s where he’d expect to find us. I can’t believe they’d deliberately murder him, but it wouldn’t be hard to put the machine out of action. A few holes in the right place would be enough. That *would* put us on a spot. We’d be stuck here while they got away in the boat when it comes.’

‘So what do we do about it?’ asked Rod calmly.

Biggles considered the problem. ‘For the moment I don’t see that we need do anything. It’ll be when we hear the machine coming that we shall have to get cracking. Between now and then the weather may clear, in which case, not seeing us on the beach, Algy would scout round for us. But it’s no use relying on the weather. It seldom does the right thing.’

‘If Algy doesn’t see us on the beach he’ll come here,’ asserted Ginger confidently.

‘Even so that wouldn’t prevent ‘em from shooting up the machine. We’re too close to the ridge. It’d be like shooting at a sitting duck. This needs thinking about. We’re in no hurry.’

‘What’s to stop us making a sortie and outflanking them?’ suggested Rod.

‘What good would that do?’

‘We could dislodge ‘em.’

‘How?’

‘We’ve got guns.’

Biggles shook his head. ‘I’m not starting any pitched battle to make my name headline news. If they attacked us it would be a different matter. We’d be justified in defending ourselves.’

‘What are they doing now if they aren’t attacking us?’ argued Rod.

‘That’s open to question. We couldn’t prove they’d been shooting at us.’

‘All right, if that’s how you feel. Would you like me to go out and try to locate ‘em? My scatter-gun would give them something to think about. I could sting ‘em without killing anyone.’

‘No, thanks all the same. I’m not letting you go out to offer yourself as an

easy target. This is no time or place to have casualties on our hands.'

'They're probably thinking the same thing.'

'Meaning on their side or ours?'

'Both.'

'I don't get it.'

'I guess that was only a warning shot they fired at Bertie, to send him back in here. It wasn't intended to hit him. Had that been what they wanted, unless they're rotten shots they must have got him.'

'Hold hard a minute,' protested Bertie. 'That bullet whispered in my ear.'

'A miss is as good as a mile. Look at it like this. Had they been serious in wanting to bump you off, all they had to do was let you walk on right into 'em: to a range so close they couldn't miss. As you didn't know they were there that would have been plumb easy.'

Biggles took a deep draw at his cigarette. 'You know, Rod, I think you may have something there. Your argument makes sense to me. They can't want bodies lying about any more than we do, in case our relief gets here before their boat. Illicit whisky distilling is a minor crime compared with murder.'

'Supposing you're right, what difference does it make?' queried Ginger.

'At this particular moment not much, because we've no reason to go outside. But if the weather should change, or Algy arrive on the scene, it would make things easier if we knew their shooting was only bluff.'

'There's only one way to find that out, old boy, and that's by putting it to the test — if you see what I mean,' contributed Bertie, breathing on his eyeglass and polishing it.

'Don't talk like a chump,' Biggles told him. 'What's the point in knowing they're prepared to use their guns after the damage has been done?'

'I don't mind going out.'

'Stay where you are.'

Conversation had lagged for a while when Biggles announced from the window that it was getting brighter.

'This murk can clear as quickly as it comes down,' asserted Rod. 'I've seen it happen.'

'I hope you're right. It'd be a change to be able to see something.'

'They must think they've got us pinned down,' said Ginger.

'So they have if it comes to that,' replied Biggles. 'But as we've no urgent reason to go out, why worry?'

The mist was now definitely dispersing, with the result that visibility improved rapidly, as Rod had said it might. The ridge, being close, was clear. Biggles surveyed it closely through the binoculars but could see no movement. The beach, being directly below the ridge, was out of sight. Only the more distant part of the sea was in view, although not as far as the horizon, which was still hazy. No vessel of any sort was to be seen.

'I'd like to know just what these crooks think they're going to gain by this

manoeuvre,' remarked Biggles pensively. 'Their boat isn't due until tomorrow. I can't believe they're going to sit out there all day and all tonight. If that's the idea I wish 'em joy.'

'What else can they do?' asked Rod.

'I'd have thought they'd be better employed at the castle, getting rid of the evidence of what they've been doing.'

'How?'

'They could throw it over the cliff into the sea.'

'Maybe they don't feel inclined to pack up yet.'

'They can't be so daft as to suppose they'll be allowed to stay here after all this. They must realize they can no more get away from here than we can.'

'They're not to know Algy is likely to be back any time now,' Ginger pointed out. 'They may not be thinking of escaping. They may think that if their boat comes before we're relieved they'd be fairly safe in wiping us out.'

'They'd have to be super-optimists to think that.'

'I don't see how we can do much if Algy does come unless we can make contact with him. I'd say it's ten to one he lands on the beach. If he does he'll be in trouble. Those men on the ridge must be able to cover it. They'll shoot him up. As they're between us and the beach, how are we going to stop it?'

'You don't suppose I was going to sit here doing nothing while he landed on the beach?' returned Biggles sarcastically. 'If he looks like doing that we shall have to go down to him, whatever the enemy may do to stop us. He may come here first. This is where he left us.'

'The machine would still be under fire.'

'That's a chance we shall have to take. Algy needn't be on the ground more than a minute, long enough for me to tell him to get off again and radio an S.O.S.. If anyone has a better suggestion I'm listening.'

No one spoke. Biggles lit another cigarette. Minutes passed. Then Ginger said: 'Here comes Algy now. I can hear the machine. I'll see if I can spot him.' He ran out, but ducked back as a bullet smacked against the stone wall of the house.

'So they're still at it,' muttered Biggles. 'Well, we shall soon know how far they mean business.' He took his gun from his pocket and went to the door without exposing himself more than was unavoidable. 'It's Algy all right,' he announced briskly. 'He's coming straight in. Throw something on the fire, Ginger, to make smoke. That may bring him here.'

Ginger obeyed, throwing on the smouldering fire anything that came to hand.

'No use,' snapped Biggles, a minute later. 'He can't be looking this way. He's hanging over the beach.'

'Surely he'll spot the men on the ridge!' exclaimed Rod.

'Not if they're keeping flat. Or he may take them for us. Come on! Make for the beach. Open out — don't bunch up.' So saying Biggles dashed out and made a swerving run towards the ridge. The others followed, separating.

Several shots were fired in a scattered volley, but they were ineffective. None came Ginger's way. No one stopped. A man jumped up from where he had been lying and dived over the ridge. There came two heavier reports from Rod's twelve-bore, but Ginger could not see what he was shooting at.

Then the unexpected happened. The aircraft, which had dropped out of sight below the ridge as if going down to land, suddenly swung up again, came over the ridge, and after making a tight circuit inland came sinking towards the croft.

'Back to the house, everyone,' yelled Biggles, making frantic signals.

Everyone ran back. Oddly enough there was no more shooting.

'What made Algy do that?' panted Ginger, as they went on to the back of the house to put it between them and the danger area.

'He must have spotted what was going on.'

'Why did they stop shooting?'

'They may have been running down the bank to the beach. No matter.'

Biggles was standing in the open, making hand signals for the machine to land. It sank down on the spot where it had unloaded the stores.

Biggles hurried to the door of the aircraft but stopped when it was thrown open and Inspector Gaskin of the C.I.D. jumped down, complete in dark suit and bowler hat as if he had just left his office at Scotland Yard. He was followed by a uniformed police sergeant.

'What the hell's going on here?' demanded the Inspector angrily.

'Take cover, all of you; we're under fire,' said Biggles tersely. 'Switch off, Algy. The machine will have to take its luck for a minute or two.'

'Under fire! Are you telling me?' snorted the Inspector. 'A bullet took the heel off my boot as we came down. What's the idea?'

'Two or three shots hit us,' put in Algy. 'I saw men running down the bank to the beach and realized it was no place for me.'

'They were in too much of a hurry,' conjectured Biggles. 'They should have let you get on the ground before they opened up.'

'What's all this about? That's what I want to know,' said Gaskin shortly.

'What are you doing here, anyway?'

'Me? I've come to collect some gaol-birds I understand you've got here. I've been looking for 'em for some time. What a hide-out. No wonder I couldn't find 'em. So they'd shoot at police, would they? We'll see about that.'

'There are six of 'em,' warned Biggles.

'What have they been doing here — just lying low?'

'Far from it. They've been running an illicit whisky still in the castle. I've seen it. They know the game's up, but they've got a boat on the way over, so I imagine they hope to get away in it. They're armed. They've kept us cooped up in here to prevent us from getting down to the beach. Rather than risk casualties, I decided to play safe until Algy got here.'

'Ah. So that's it. Do you know when this boat of theirs is due to show up?'

‘Tomorrow, we think.’

‘Good. We’ll nab the crew and get ‘em all in the bag together.’

‘Just how do you propose to do that? There are six of ‘em here already and they carry guns.’

‘When they see what’s coming they’ll think twice before they use ‘em,’ asserted Gaskin, taking out his pipe and filling it.

‘What is coming?’

Algy answered. ‘The Navy. There’s a salvage job on the way to raise Rod’s boat.’

‘Where is it now?’

‘It must be nearly here. We passed it a few miles out as we came over.’

‘In that case we might as well wait until it gets here,’ suggested Biggles.

‘They may have spotted it, which would explain why there’s been no more shooting.’ Algy looked round the corner of the house. ‘Here it comes now, close in. They’ve seen it all right. They’re running.’

The Inspector spun round. ‘Running where?’

‘Towards the castle.’

‘Ha! We’ll see about that.’ Gaskin strode into the open. ‘Hi! You!’ he bellowed. ‘Come back here. I want to talk to you.’

The others joined him. Ginger saw the fugitives had stopped, apparently undecided. Then three of them ran on. The others, walking slowly, came back. He noticed Larkin was one of them.

‘Come on — come on,’ rapped out Gaskin impatiently. ‘We haven’t got all day. You can mark time here,’ he went on as they came up. ‘Let’s have no nonsense. Throw out those guns.’

The men obeyed, sullenly, looking subdued, the effect, perhaps, of the presence of a police uniform.

‘I’d better go down to the harbour and attend to things there,’ said Rod.

‘I’ll come with you and leave Gaskin to do the tidying up,’ decided Biggles. He looked at the Inspector. ‘What are you going to do about the other three?’

‘You needn’t worry about them. We’ll winkle ‘em out presently. They won’t give any trouble when they’ve had time to think things over.’

‘Okay. Come on, Rod. Let’s go and have a word with the boys in blue,’ concluded Biggles.

That, for all practical purposes, was the end of the trouble on what in the Air Police office was thereafter referred to as Rod’s Island.

At Biggles’s request an exchange of radio signals between the commander of the salvage vessel and the Customs authorities resulted in the prompt arrival of a coastguard cutter with several officers on board. The prisoners were handed over and taken away. These included the three who had fled to the castle.

As Inspector Gaskin had predicted, when they realized they had no hope of

getting away they gave no trouble. With the sergeant he walked straight up to the castle and ordered the men to come out with their hands up. This they did, perceiving no doubt that resistance would be futile.

With the proper equipment, the raising of Rod's boat was a simple matter. It had suffered no damage. Pumped dry and with the engine cleaned up it was as good as new. As Biggles told the officer in charge, it was the ill-advised sinking of it and Rod's subsequent complaint that had brought the police to the island to investigate.

The arrest of the other members of the gang followed as a matter of course. The fishing-boat, used to transport the whisky to the mainland from where it was taken to London by road, identified by the number on its sail which Ginger had noted, was intercepted by the cutter. Sacks of barley, and empty whisky casks, apparently intended for refilling, confirmed the part it had played in the business.

The night clubs owned by the man who had financed the undertaking were raided, and the discovery of raw whisky on the premises left no loop-hole for evading the inevitable result, particularly as the man had a record of previous convictions. It was his privately owned aircraft that had been used to carry escaped prisoners and other 'wanted' men to the island. This, according to Larkin, who turned Queen's Evidence, was in return for a share of the loot of bank robberies and wage-snatch raids.

In talking things over, Gaskin admitted it was a well-thought-out scheme which might have gone on for a long while had it not been for the one weakness that had brought about its collapse — the arrival of the owner of the island on the scene. It was known that he lived in Canada or the United States, so there was some excuse for not making allowance against such a possibility.

Rod, now having a boat at his disposal, decided to do what he originally intended; which was to stay on Tola for a few days to examine more closely his plan to repopulate it.

Examination of the police helicopter revealed no serious damage, so the others flew home in it. Rod's last words at parting was a standing invitation to visit him in the castle, any time they felt like a holiday, after he had made it more like a home.

'There's no accounting for taste,' remarked Biggles, as Tola faded into the mist behind them. 'Personally I wouldn't care if I never saw the place again. I'm all for a quiet life, but I can see there's such a thing as having it too quiet.'

'I'm with you — absolutely, old boy,' decided Bertie. 'With nothing else but those bally gulls squawking all day, I'd soon be climbing the wall. I like my islands warm, any old how. Give me one where the jolly old bananas grow. That's me.'

'When you find one I'll come with you,' promised Ginger.

THE END